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DEAD MAN'S EFFECTS

by

H. C. BAILEY

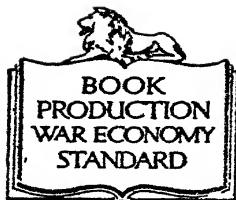


LONDON

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*All the characters in this story are
entirely fictitious and represent no
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DEAD MAN'S EFFECTS

CHAPTER I

DESSERT

"THEY want us to get skates on now," said the young man.

"What do you mean?" the elder asked.

"Rush production."

The elder turned over a page of typescript and pointed to the top of the next.

"I raised that, sir. They'll chance it. I went through it with . . ."

"What, working?" a gay voice cried. "Any more odd jobs for me?"

"No, thanks, I've finished, Margot." Sir Thomas Meon put the typescript into a portfolio and locked it, the portfolio into a drawer of his desk and locked that.

The young man stood up, which did not bring his eyes to the level of Margot's but he looked at her fervently. "Hallo, Don!" she discovered his existence. "The War House hasn't kept you long." She turned on Meon's desk lamp, swept away to the case-ment windows, and blacked them out, rejecting Major Donald Norton's help, and departed.

"Shall we go into it, sir?" Norton suggested.

"No. I'll deal with it in the morning," said Meon.

Norton left him. Meon sat for some time looking at the photograph on his desk of a lad in Air Force uniform who was much like him, full browed, eyes far apart over wide cheeks and chin. He switched off the light, and went out to pace to and fro in the dusk on the terrace below his study windows.

Hartdean House stood on a ridge which fell steeply northward to flat land. Its gracious, elegant front looked south over buxom curves of wooded hill and combe. The terrace Meon chose stretched along the east side, which had two low stories of brown stone, austere plain. More than once he glanced up to the blind windows before he stood still at the northern end. It gave him a drear, dull prospect, corn stacks looming out of the dusk close below the ridge, then vague flats, boundless, featureless, except where the chimneys of his works at Radbury poked up and darkened

the sky. But he stood watching this landscape some time before he turned, and with a last glance at the windows went back to the house. . . .

Lady Meon let herself enjoy the bliss of feeling superfluous. She had not expected it. Eight was the perfect number for dinner, of course, but not when five men and three women made the eight, and one didn't really know three of the men, and Tom's men, poor dear, were often so heavy in hand. A long week-end with this three promised ceaseless, painful, futile endeavour to be bright.

Not one even English. Mr. Max Falkenstein, American and a technician, whatever that might be. Mr. Frederic Launay, Canadian manufacturer. Mr. Gustav Toll, something or other in Turkey—of all places—though he couldn't be a Turk. They didn't know each other, but they had all come to England on war business, and met Tom over it, and men like that generally had no manners, and wouldn't be amused, and nagged each other the whole time. But these were well enough.

More than presentable. Rather fascinating. Gustav Toll, almost as dark as an Indian, fierce, big features, scarred and wrinkled, and a shock of hair bleached platinum blonde on end all over his head, wild and weird to behold, but very man of the world. He made poor little Don Norton next him trivial. There was nothing wild about the American, Max Falkenstein, who might have been produced by Eton and Oxford if he didn't talk so naturally. Everything about him correct, precise, but the fresh-coloured, smooth face had a charming smile, and he smiled most of the time. He couldn't be as young as he looked by years and years, or he wouldn't be in Tom's class. A great deal more than a pretty boy. And he made just the right contrast for Frederic Launay opposite him, who was like a Vandyke portrait, sage, earnest, venerable. Yes, Launay was handsome absolutely. One could think him comic, the little grey, pointed beard and moustache, the velvet dinner jacket, the frilled shirt front made such a show, and yet one didn't think that at all. They were just right for him. He had no self-consciousness. He was as natural as Max Falkenstein in his own courtly style. The thoroughbred aristocrat.

Lady Meon looked down the table to her husband. Tom certainly had no style. The sort of man who might be anybody. Some wretch called him the eternal man in the street, and capped that by saying he was the bourgeois everyone tried to shock and couldn't. And people always brought up the old joke: "Hard-faced man who had done very well out of the war." Of course it

was a plain, ordinary face, rather assertive and pushful, and he had done wonderfully well. At fourteen, cleaning cars in a little Radbury garage, at fifty-five head of one of the biggest motor combines, his Radbury cars all over the world. And now, sixty-three, with factories everywhere at work on tanks and aircraft engines, a tremendous person.

Did he like it? Did he care? Did he care much about anything? She never knew. They had only been married ten years—no, twelve, she was thirty-four. There must be masses of money. People made fun of his staying on at inconvenient old Hartdean and the little Kensington place, the houses he bought for his first wife, said he couldn't bear to spend. He certainly wanted value for all he spent, an ample way of living on the modest scale he chose, but he was generous in his fashion, he was kind, he rather liked her than not, yes, he did like to have her with him. Care for her? That was another thing. He never seemed sorry they had no children. Perhaps he loved his first wife. Nobody seemed to think so. But he was fond of her son, though he didn't show it, and Michael was difficult. Unfortunate, the boy crashing just after one of their quarrels. Tom had never mentioned him since.

Lady Meon felt more superfluous than when she began these reflections, less happy. Tom ought to want a child from her. If he didn't care enough for her he ought for his own sake. Except her cousin, Margot—and what use was she?—he hadn't anybody in the world but his nephew's little boy, a nephew he'd never seen, too. How strange Jim Denlan should have been killed flying in America, like Michael at home! Not strange, exactly, of Tom to bring Avice Denlan and the boy over to England and look after them, but rather surprising in him. Avice did write a good letter, and the photographs were quite attractive. Of course one could make out the small boy had some likeness to Michael, round, full brow, eyes wide apart. Still, if Avice hadn't been so pretty—

She was more than that. For looks, features, colour, shape, Lady Meon, not vain of her own small person, had comfortable certainty no woman would rank Avice Denlan with her—to say nothing of Margot. But though Avice's thin prettiness was wan and insipid opposite Margot's rich vigour, and even beside Lady Meon would have been commonplace, the girl made an effect. Big eyes, with some appeal in them, not used too much, thoughtful, sad, but ready to light up and be interested in a woman as well as men. Lady Meon paid the tribute of unwilling admiration. Avice listened admirably even to Margot, who talked more than enough,

besides Falkenstein on one side and Toll on the other, talking herself in a soft voice only when they needed it, not favouring either man, making the conversation as general as she could. Compared with Avice, Margot had been raw and rude—not a word for little Don Norton at her right, and few for Launay at her left, loud and intimate across the table to Falkenstein, as if she owned him. He had not been forthcoming, which made her noisier, and required tact from Lady Meon. Launay intervened, led Margot into discussion of life at large, and drew her out with courteous sarcasm which set Falkenstein free to enjoy himself with Avice on English ways and American ways, and enabled Lady Meon to feel wholly superfluous. For Avice took care Tom should not be dumb, and under her bright eyes Toll poured forth challenging opinions of both countries. And they were still thus engaged when dessert came.

An incredibly successful dinner after all. Except for poor little Don Norton. One never saw a man more out of things. His own fault, to be sure. He was helpless in company, an outsider by nature. No, not fair to say that. Of course he hadn't any background, his people kept a village shop, but Tom was just the same. The little man wouldn't have done so well from nothing, decorations and one of the youngest majors in the army, wouldn't be liaison between Tom and the War House without character to back his brains. Tom didn't like him much, but Tom said he was high powered, and Tom grudged praise of anyone. Margot had made a mess of him, the wretch. When he first came he was shy and awkward, but quite a possible person. She took him up, beautiful lady kind to clever boy, he fell for her absurdly, and she snubbed him till he lost all form, shapeless, hopeless, helpless. Too bad of her. Of course the boy was a goose to suppose she meant anything. That didn't excuse Margot. She might amuse herself if she chose; the display of despising him was vulgar. She needn't wonder if the little man nursed a grudge.

That sort of man might turn poisonous. He dropped something like a hint the other day Margot went into Tom's room too much. She did, of course. She had a greedy appetite for power over men, and if Tom was almost old enough to be her grandfather he could still excite girls like Margot; he would still play with any attractive girl.

Lady Meon amused herself by fancy of the little man hoping to make her jealous of Margot. Too silly—but quite possible. Or did he intend to make Tom think Margot meddlesome and inquisitive. That would be clever. Tom hated women who were curious,

women who wanted anything. The magnificent Margot with her nose put out of joint by Don Norton! How droll—but how disagreeable. Lady Meon's sensitive face puckered.

Heavens! Why was Don staring at her? No, not at her, beyond her. He pushed back his chair, he made for the door, calling out: "Hallo, old man, it's all right, come along."

Everyone turned. A small boy in pyjamas, barefoot, stood holding the door open, blinking tearful in the light. Norton swung the child up to his shoulder. "There we are, Antonio. On top of the world. The big man isn't too late for dessert, is he, Lady Meon?"

Lady Meon raised her eyebrows at Avice, who rose and came to the child, and said: "Oh, naughty one," and smiled and held out her arms.

"But a brave one," said Launay.

"What's the matter with him?" Meon asked.

The child neither moved nor spoke. "Ah, give him to me, Major Norton; thank you very much." Avice took him and kissed him. "I am so sorry, Aunt Florence," she apologised to Lady Meon. "He always sleeps like an angel. Tell mamma, darling. Is it a pain?"

The child shook his head.

"Why do you come down then?"

"It was all dark, and there was no one."

"Oh, la, la, la!" Avice laughed. "You are not frightened of the dark any more, you are great, big, four years old."

"But there was someone screaming in the dark."

"No, Tony, there was not. Look, we were all here wide-awake grown-ups, and we are quite sure nobody made any noise."

Tony's glistening eyes surveyed the company with doubt.

"That's right, old man," said Norton. "I say, Mrs. Denlan, a pear or something would do good, wouldn't it?"

"Thank you," she smiled. "We will go back to bed with just one chocolate." She gave Lady Meon a gentle, deprecating glance, "Forgive me," as she took the child away.

Toll turned to Meon. "Sir, it leaps to the eye the child is of your blood."

"D'ye think so?" Meon was gruff.

"Good blood cannot lie," said Launay.

"Where is Tony sleeping, Florence?" Meon asked.

"In the old nursery. Avice has the blue room next door." Lady Meon thought it odd he should bring that up. Of course the child had the nursery which was once Michael's.

Meon rang the bell and asked the butler if there had been any noise round the house—in the house—on the stairs—upstairs. The butler had not heard anything, but would enquire.

"You left a lot out, Cousin Tom," Margot laughed at him.

"What's in your head?" he barked.

"Has there been a wild goose round the house? Has anyone seen a mare making her nest? The mare's nesting call is marvellous. Isn't it, Don?"

Norton cleared his throat. "I'm mechanised, Miss Buckland."

The butler came back rather short of breath. No noise had occurred anywhere, Sir Thomas, but there seemed to be a large fire in the Ladywell vicinity.

Meon flung an excuse at his guests, and went out, Norton close behind him. "Men of action," said Margot to Falkenstein. "Let's see the show. Or do fires leave you cold?"

"I haven't grown up yet," Falkenstein answered.

"Come on, then." She carried him off.

"What is Ladywell, Madame?" Toll asked.

"It's really the name of a spring," Lady Meon told him. "Now it means the fields round about, under the hill on the north."

"So? But your fields could not burn at this season. The corn is all reaped. Some house or building, do you think?"

"I don't understand, myself." She rose. "There are only scattered cottages on the Ladywell side. If they have caught fire we need not go out, we can see from the library."

She led the way, switched a light on and off again, moved to the north window and pulled the curtains back. A tawny glow broke upon her.

"*Bigre!* What an affair," said Toll.

Yellow surges of flame rose out of the flat land spreading across the rickyard which fed them. Some of the ricks had sunk to ripples of red ash, some were still unscathed, sharply defined by the fire as it leapt at them from the others and lapped about them.

"A sad affair for the farmer," said Launay. "He might yet save something perhaps, if he were quick."

"The farmhouse is miles away," said Lady Meon. They heard Norton at the telephone calling the Radbury fire brigade.

"Radbury? How far is that?" Launay asked.

"Two or three miles," she answered.

"The fire cannot be one mile from here," said Toll. "Look, you can see a man near the blaze. The farmer, perhaps, at last. What do you think, Launay? We might assist the poor fellow."

"Your eyes are better than mine," said Launay. "But let us go, by all means."

They hurried away. Lady Meon tried to see the man, and could not see anyone anywhere, though the blaze lit up a wide expanse of fields, and made the sky lurid to the murk and the tall chimneys of Radbury. The interest, the energy of Launay and Toll surprised her. Old fellows rushing off on a bleak autumn night to help put out a rickyard fire! Too comical, but sweet of them.

What was Tom doing, not going himself, surely? It would be much more like him to send Don Norton, and quite out of his way to go—after all, what did a rickyard matter?—and let Norton stay and telephone for the fire-brigade. Perhaps Margot had carried him off as well as Falkenstein. Yes, one might have expected that. Lady Meon opened the window and listened, but heard neither voice nor movement.

Ridiculous. Where they were, what they did or said hadn't the slightest importance. She shut the window silently.

CHAPTER II

TOM'S CURTAINS

HEAVY thuds beat into her ears, crash upon crash and echoing roar. She saw clouds of smoke rise, many-coloured, from the ground under the Radbury chimneys, roll high and blot them out. The smoke thickened, shone brighter, tossed and swirled by gleaming upward surges.

A siren wailed. When the moaning died away Lady Meon heard the boom of aircraft. They were loud, they were near, they were almost overhead, but high—higher—at least the noise was fainter. They had gone.

Someone ran past the window. She hurried to the front door and found it open, and Meon outside. "Aren't you coming in now, Tom?"

"Of course I'm not. The devils hit the works."

"I'm so sorry. Where is Major Norton?"

"Getting the car. You don't want him."

"What has become of the others?"

"How should I know? Go and look after Tony and Avice."

The car came, and he rushed to it and drove off.

Lady Meon went slowly upstairs. Tom wasn't often rude. He had never given her orders before. Quite natural he should be furious and anxious for his works and his workpeople, and think of nothing else. But he needn't have said he had no use for her except to look after Avice and Tony.

She reached the second floor. The nursery door stood open. She heard Tony say: "What are you doing?"

Avice looked out and smiled at her, and said: "It's Auntie Florence, dearest. Isn't she kind?" and whispered: "He was so good and brave, the angel. Has there been anything here? I thought I heard some noise downstairs but——"

"Nothing at all."

"Thank God! Come and see him just a moment, please. He loves you, you know."

One shaded light in the nursery cast a glimmer by the bedside. Tony became visible, sitting up. "Auntie?" he asked.

"Yes, dear." Lady Meon came to him.

"What was the noises?"

"Just people at work at night, ever so far away."

"They didn't sound far. Mamma says wasn't any, but there was lots."

"Darling," Avice laughed and cuddled him. "Auntie knows, Auntie takes such care of us, Auntie won't let any noise come close to hurt."

The siren sounded all clear.

"Listen," said Lady Meon. "That's a real noise, and that tells us there aren't going to be noises that matter. So everyone can lie down and sleep. You will, won't you? I shall."

"Kiss Auntie Florence good night, darling," Avice prompted him. He turned a dutiful cheek, and let himself be kissed, and snuggled down and sighed, and Avice whispered: "You are sweet with him," and sat down by the bed and began to sing softly:

" ' Winken and Blinken are two little eyes
And Nod is a little head——' "

As Lady Meon went downstairs she felt useless—contrast to the bliss of feeling superfluous. It was not relieved by discovery that Margot had come back.

Margot and Falkenstein, the girl's colour even brighter than usual, sat in the lounge drinking. He stood up, grave and deferential. "Can I be of any assistance, Lady Meon?"

"Not at all."

"Cheerio, Florence," Margot exclaimed. "Have one. Where's everybody?"

"No, thank you. I suppose you heard the raid."

"Rather. Jerry must have dropped oodles of nests. But don't worry. It was only tip and run. Where is the great man?"

"The factory has been hit. Tom and Major Norton have gone there."

"The factory?" Margot whistled.

Falkenstein looked ashamed of himself. "Pardon me, Lady Meon, I'll join them, if I may."

"There is no need. You would not be able to find them now. They went when they saw the bombs fall, quite a long time ago."

"Cut it out, Max," said Margot. "Cousin Tom has Don, and he hates anyone butting in on him."

"I understand that very well. Major Norton ranks high with all."

"Don't be sore, old thing," Margot laughed. "Don's rank is star of the white-bearded boys."

Lady Meon said she was going to bed, and left them. That Falkenstein should be so fatuous under Margot's hands surprised and annoyed her. The man had intelligence and poise, and knew something of the way of the world. He might play the fool with a girl like Margot, but he should take care she was the fool not he. She made him as futile and helpless as little Don Norton.

On the landing which split the main staircase into two flights Lady Meon paused. Max Falkenstein and Margot were still in the lounge. He hadn't even the sense, the decency, to take a hint from his hostess. She felt half a mind to call Margot, but the other half objected, and won at the sound of a door and the sight of Launay and Toll. They crossed the hall, they went into the lounge together. An unpleasant surprise for Margot; Lady Meon enjoyed that thought, and proceeded upstairs.

Her room was on the first floor. It faced south, nothing could be seen of Radbury from its windows, so she turned along the corridor of the east wing to Meon's study. By the light which came in with her from the corridor she saw the curtains move.

She stood still watching them. The curtains weren't properly drawn, it was a draught; there was a draught, but the windows must be open. Yes, one casement wasn't fastened. That came of Margot doing the blackout for Tom.

With the door shut, Lady Meon turned on the lights and looked round. Desk and tables and all the room seemed in the usual

precise order. There hadn't been wind enough to upset anything or blow papers about. She switched the lights off, and pulled back the dark green curtains.

Huge, dense smoke clouds hung over Radbury, no more violent movement in them, no flames broke through. They loomed yellow and clinging, like fog, but the raw air drifted upon her the smell of fire. One couldn't see; one couldn't tell, useless to stare and wonder what had really happened—and Tom . . . She shut the window, she drew the curtains, and went to bed, and believed she had not slept a moment when she woke and found him in his dressing-room bathed and shaved.

"When did you get back, Tom?"

"Half an hour ago."

"My dear! It's past eight now. You must be tired. You should go to bed."

"I'm all right. Don't fuss." He gave her a friendly kiss.

"Was the raid very bad?"

"If these fellows ask about the damage, you haven't heard. I only came in for breakfast. You're sorry their visit has been spoilt, and so on, and they must come again. Be civil to Falkenstein, but that'll do." The door shut behind him.

Quite intimate for Tom. Probably he trusted her as much as anyone except Don Norton.

She played her part over the breakfast table, and found it easy in spite of Margot, who asked why the great white chief had gone hush hush, and proposed they should drive to Radbury and see things. The men, even Falkenstein, took not the least notice, but kept up an agreeable conversation, with only just enough about the raid to show sympathy, and make clear they would go away at once. They praised the house, and Meon, with compliments not overdone. Margot flung out of the room. They told pleasant stories. They talked of themselves. They said good-bye. They promised Lady Meon they would come to Hartdean again whenever she asked them. Toll and Launay went off. Falkenstein hoped he would see her in London soon.

You mean Margot, Lady Meon thought, but remembering she must be civil to him said: "Very soon, I hope. I will write the moment we are back."

Avice came down just before they drove away, and told them Tony was quite well, really, but he was having breakfast in bed.

CHAPTER III

THE LAND GIRL

A LITTLE earlier on that Saturday morning an old man trudged through rubble and broken glass across Radbury market-place to the police station. There were many in front of him with questions for the inspector—what had happened to father, to son, when would the children be got out, where could families go, what was become of the wife?

At last the old man had his turn, but stood dumb.

"Well, who is it you're asking about?" the inspector prompted him.

"I ain't asking nothing. I come to tell you about my girl. I found her dead and cold."

"Where?"

"In Ladywell brook. Which she hadn't no business o' nights nor by day neither."

The inspector told a sergeant to carry on, and took the old man out of the queue into an office for private enquiries.

His name was Jacob Marsh, he lived at Dean Cottages, out under Ladywell with his grand-daughter, name of Marsh, too, rising twenty. She had kept house five or six year, since his old woman died. Come the war she was mad to be one of these land girls, all dressed up, and Gill, of Enstone Farm, took her. He had nothing against Gill, nor against Carrie neither. She was a good girl, and she looked after him proper nice, but he didn't hold with girls on the land. He was a hedger and ditcher, not working for Gill regular, nor any man, which he called no man master, nor never would, but taking jobs as they came, and he hadn't done so bad. Carrie had no need to go after wages, she got all a girl wanted from him, and she wasn't one of your flashy spendthrifts, but go she would, talked about doing her bit and feeling free. Not meaning any harm by that, not at all. Nor he never kept a tight hand on her, let her do as she pleased and no questions asked.

She went out when she chose o' nights and came in when she chose. It was nature for a girl to go with boys, but he'd never seen her with one nor heard of her doing such, darned few boys left round their way. Last night they had supper seven o'clock, and he was in bed by half-past eight or so, like usual; maybe Carrie went off before, soon as she finished washing up, maybe not, he

didn't hear her, he couldn't tell the time. Only it must have been before the bombs. They waked him, and he looked out and saw Cobbley rickyard afire. It was no use for him to go along there, nor anyone else, the ricks was burning theirselves to the ground, but he reckoned him and Carrie had better dress and get downstairs, so he called her. She wasn't in her room, she wasn't anywhere round the place.

It worried him, but he couldn't do nothing in the dark, not knowing which way she'd gone; only sit and wait. He didn't hear another sound, except the all clear, through the night. At break o' day he started off to search for her, down towards the Radbury road, round by the rickyard, which was nought but an ash heap, then up along the Ladywell brook. And there she was, right under Hartdean hill, lying in the brook drowned dead.

"Did you move her?" the inspector asked.

"I pulled her out. I couldn't do no more. I come straight to tell the police. She never had no business up there."

The inspector unfolded a large-scale map. "Here's where you live, Dean Cottages. Now put your finger on the place you found her."

"I ain't no hand with maps." A gnarled, brown finger meandered slowly. "Hereabouts, I reckon." It came to rest at a point not far from Hartdean House.

The rickyard was some half mile away, her home more than a mile. No main road went near the point, but several paths over the flat fields, serving the rickyard, isolated cottages and barns, met a little lower down the brook.

"I'll drive you out, Mr. Marsh," said the inspector.

"Thank 'e kindly. You won't get no hearse there, not much past my place. You chaps can nobbut bring her down on a hurdle."

"The ambulance has a stretcher," the inspector assured him.

"Ah, that's real handsome for her," said Marsh, and was not suspected of irony.

The rutted lane to Dean Cottages, one small dwelling of lichen-plastered and mossy thatch, ended in a rough bridle track. Bent and hobbling, Marsh went up that so fast that Inspector Venn was hot when they reached the brook at a plank bridge. Their track turned away from it to round the steep slopes of Hartdean hill. On the other side the bridge field paths diverged. Marsh crossed and trudged along the bank, which was pathless, high above deep, still water.

He stopped, he took off his cap.

Inspector Venn looked down at a begrimed handkerchief covering the head of a woman, whose clothes were sodden and muddy, but smoothed about her, whose hands held tufts of grass and weed. Lifting the handkerchief he saw a pale, red face with smears of froth by the mouth and nostrils.

"Was she under water when you found her?" he asked.

"Half and half," said Marsh. "Close agin the bank there."

Around her the tangle of long grass and meadow-sweet and loosestrife stalks had been flattened and mud-stained. Beneath the high bank clumps of iris rose with broken leaves out of the eddying stream.

"She were caught on them," Marsh explained. "Swep' in, I reckon."

"How deep does it get?"

"Deep enough; you'd lose your footing a yard from the bank."

Venn thought that about right.

On the whole, then, Marsh's story hung together. He told the truth, there wasn't much mystery about the girl's death. Coming along after dark, she stumbled and fell into the brook; anyone might take a bad toss along that bank and be unable to get out. The stream ran fast, as well as deep.

No, not much mystery, but a bit. Why had she come up there? Marsh swore he couldn't tell, made that the big thing, she hadn't any reason known to him. Perhaps he knew a lot and was covering himself. What he said gave the idea he suspected foul play, but he stopped short of saying so outright, and a long way short of accusing anybody. He denied she went with a boy. But what could the girl go out for of nights except love-making?

The place suited that fairly well, too, with the cross paths meeting and higher up cosy nooks.

Still, the question where the boy came from was a teaser. Old Marsh must know pretty well all about the local lads, and the farm people wouldn't miss any bit of scandal.

An idea slowly formed in Venn's mind, and led him to point up stream and ask: "What's that?"

"Where? I don't see nothing," Marsh stared.

"It looks like a bit of khaki in the bushes. Do you get soldiers much?"

"I never come across none," said Marsh, but he hobbled to the bushes. "Nor there ain't no khaki here, mister. What put it into your head there was?"

"You have camps round about, you know, all sorts, and some of the lads wander."

"Not my way, they don't," Marsh retorted, and went back to his grand-daughter's body.

Venn followed in doubt, thinking it probable the old man believed what he said, yet suspecting the girl had picked up a soldier and died of it by accident, suicide or murder.

Opportunity to consider the doubt was denied. The stretcher-party arrived, and brought instructions from the Chief Constable he should proceed at once to Cobbley rickyard, examine and report.

CHAPTER IV

GROUPIE

THIS order annoyed Venn. It wasn't giving him a fair deal. He had enough in hand. What was the use of his examining burnt-out ricks? The Chief ought to send a fire-brigade man, not him, if there were suspicions about how the fire started.

He spent some time over decorous arrangement of the removal of Carrie Marsh's body. Marsh gave him grateful, hearty thanks, with an ironic flavour in them he did not notice; but when he said good-bye at the bridge and took the path which led to the rickyard, Marsh stood still and called after him: "Here, mister. What be going that way for? That won't take you nowhere."

"A look round," said Venn, going on with fresh doubt. Why the angry objection? Marsh had said he went round by the rickyard himself when he searched for the girl, but he kept well away from it as they came up. Natural enough, perhaps, not so the objection. Did Marsh know there was something in the rickyard—something that would connect him with the girl's death?

Several men were at work upon the ashes of the ricks. Air Force blue stood outside the charred gate, a flight-sergeant looked Venn's uniform up and down and grinned. "Mr. Inspector, I presume?"

"Inspector Venn, County Police. Who is in charge of your party?"

"Don't let him hear you talk that way. Groupie's having kittens."

"What do you mean?"

"Pardon me. The Group Captain expected your arrival at an earlier moment. This way, if you please."

Venn was brought before a faded shabby mackintosh which hung loose under choleric nose and chin. There seemed to be

nothing else of the Group Captain but his brass hat. With deep growls he condemned the slackness of Inspector Venn, the police-force in general, the civilian world.

When did the fire start, he wanted the exact time. Then he should apply to the fire-brigade, Venn hit back. The fire-brigade told him they were informed of the fire by a phone call from Hart-dean House at nine thirty-five, and turned out and found the rick-yard blazing. That gave no sort of fix for the start of the fire. The police ought to have made it definite. The Air Force, Venn retorted, might have heard Radbury was heavily bombed without warning last night, and in consequence the police had their hands full.

"You tell me you've not begun enquiries when and how the fire started?"

"I can give you no information at all. I'm here to examine the rickyard." Venn turned away.

The Group Captain asked the universe what was the use of a man without a sense of responsibility, but let him go. He chose to go over every part of the blackened yard, every other mound of ashes, before he approached that on which Air Force men were at work.

There the Group Captain stopped him with a brusque challenge. "You're shy. What did you make out of that tour?"

"I have my own way of working."

"The longest you can find. Come here."

Venn was pushed to the last mound, and saw a hollow made by careful hands scraping ash away from a dark mass of stuff that hung together.

"Didn't you smell it?" the Group Captain jeered as Venn shrank back.

It was a body, charred, burnt beyond recognition except of its having been human.

Venn swallowed nausea and said: "You'd better call your chaps off. We want an expert to make sure all the remains are got out undamaged. I'll bring the divisional surgeon."

"Wait. Have you ever heard of a man being burnt to death by a rick fire?"

"Yes, more than one."

"Who were they?"

"Tramps dossing down in ricks. I shan't be long."

Venn departed, and the Group Captain damned his impudence.

CHAPTER V

TWO-POWER CONFERENCE

ON Sunday morning Mr. Fortune took his wife to church and left her there, and strolled in the park till the sight of brussels sprouts drove him home. He was punished by a telephone message. Scotland Yard had rung soon after he went out, the written record ran, and Mr. Lomas, speaking personally, said would he come along at once, please.

And no taxi on earth.

Nevertheless, into the room of the Chief of the Criminal Investigation he ultimately came. "Sabbathless Satan," he was shrill. "Who first invented work-for-others."

"My dear Reginald, you must have been at church, though the faithful handmaid did not say so. I thought you were still in bed. How is your wife?"

"Joan's delightfully well, thank you. Though incapable of hating you as you deserve, she will try when told of this. What is it?"

"We've had an S O S from Raddonshire. They want the oracle to tell 'em the cause of death."

"My only aunt! Raddonshire—the midlands, which are sodden and unkind—in October, too. Why can't the local talent bury its own dead?"

"It doesn't quite know, you know."

"Who is the dead?"

"The police can't tell. The doctors say a man."

"Rash fellows. Where did the corpse expire?"

"He was found under the ashes of a hay-rick. The police infer he went to sleep there, as tramps do, the stack caught fire and he was burnt to death." Lomas stopped short.

"Which could be," said Reggie. "And everything possible happens sometimes."

"The police report the whole body burnt beyond recognition. What do you think?"

"Nothing. At present. Report means the police have not shown the corpse to anyone who knew it alive—as far as they can tell. Open question whether someone who did could recognise it—and would."

"When you put it like that," said Lomas slowly, "you suggest the police work has been bad."

"Oh, my Lomas! How you wrong me. Did I ever? Not so, but far otherwise. Police work very subtle. Where are you?"

"The fact is the Raddonshire police have got into a tangle with the Air Force over the case. We're impartial, of course, but you see the importance of determining the cause of death."

"I wonder!" Reggie contemplated him with a small, sad smile. "Why break the horrid news to me so gently? Are the policemen and the airmen fighting over who killed Cock Robin or what did? I can tell 'em the what but not the who. Shall I bring peace? More likely a sword."

Lomas looked hard at him and announced: "We have to face the possibility of grave trouble."

"My dear old thing! Come on. Raddonshire contains Radbury, and Radbury has just had a nasty raid, and the police and the Air Force soured on each other about it, hence the doings, what?"

"Quite in your best form, Reginald, and partly right. Radbury has never been hit before. It lies low, and is hard to find from the air. The German bombers came over very high, and were not spotted till the bombs fell. An Air Force brass hat—intelligence—made up his mind they'd been guided by this rick fire, which was blazing before their arrival. So he searched the rickyard débris for evidence how the fire started, and dug out the burnt corpse."

"Well, well. Curious and interesting. But what is the Air Force theory? Corpse was a German agent, lit the fire, and burnt himself? Or innocent victim of German plot?"

"They realise the corpse doesn't prove enemy action. They've built up their case with other circumstances." Lomas glanced at his watch. "Before the bombers came, the Radbury fire-brigade was called to the rickyard fire. So when the bombing started men and engines were out in the country, and didn't get back till the factory end of the town was smashed and blazing. I own that impresses me."

"Fire-brigade on a country jaunt at hour of German attack too convenient for pure chance? Yes. It could be. And the next thing, please."

"The Air Force wallah has pitched in complaints of the police. Neglect of duty, obstruction, and so forth. They had never examined the rickyard. When he pressed them they objected, and made difficulties. The inspector ultimately sent arrived after the Air Force had found the corpse, and then did nothing but fetch the police surgeon to take it out of their hands. That's one side.

The other is the police received no raid warning till after the bombs fell, but when the raiders had passed Air Force wallahs brought a party along and held up urgent rescue work while they went over the bombed area." Lomas glanced again at his watch. "Public interest and Chief Constable's authority ignored, and so on. About the rickyard—any question how the fire began should have been left to the fire-brigade, but since the Air Force pressed it, an inspector went up as soon as possible. He was already out on a case—the police, you must know, Reginald, have not camps full of officers and men with nothing to do, like the Air Force and the Army. So with one thing and another there is now a sort of war between the civil power and the Services in Raddonshire." At this point Lomas's telephone buzzed. . . . "Good. . . . Yes, please," he answered.

"To resume," said Reggie. "What was the inspector's case?"

"A girl found dead in a stream."

"Well, well. Fire and water. Any connection?"

"None has been suggested."

"Was she also beyond recognition?"

"No, her grandfather found her, and reported her death."

"And cause?"

"There's no mystery about that either. She was drowned."

"How? Accident, suicide, murder?"

Lomas shook his head.

The door opened to admit a man of powerful frame and dark complexion from which cheek bones and beaked nose thrust out.

"Hallo, Rosen," Lomas greeted him heartily. "You know Fortune, don't you?"

"I've slipped up more than once thinking I did," Rosen grinned, as he took Reggie's hand, but his eyes were grave. "Sir, the case we did together, made me hope I might put up another case to you some time."

"Me too," said Reggie. "Is this the happy day?"

"If you please."

"My dear chap! Splendid. Tell me all. Lomas has been breakin' something to me since breakfast, and the mind gropes after it in vain."

"Is that so?" Rosen looked from one to the other.

"Fortune's pulling both our legs," Lomas explained. "I've given him the definite facts of the Radbury affair. We can go on now to the larger issues."

"We sure can," Rosen agreed.

"Help!" Reggie sat up and gazed at him with wide, reproachful

eyes. "Have you met aforesaid facts? Corpse burnt unrecognisable in fire of unknown origin, same night as girl was drowned near, unknown whether accident, suicide or murder. The one definite fact is, both died. How and why they died contemporaneous with German bombing right on adjacent target, wholly indefinite, chances innumerable."

Rosen grinned. "Count me in, sir. I have no fault to find with the lay-out given by Mr. Lomas. It's a fair for all briefing, but it makes no shape that I see."

"We must start from it," said Lomas.

"Where to? It means not, but blunders round about a meaning," Reggie complained. "What is the brass-hatted theory? Male corpse German agent, fired the rickyards to guide his bombers to their target—or innocent patriot cramping the style of German agent. On the facts, second theory as good as first. Others also. What does brass-hatted intelligence make of girl drowned contemporaneous and contiguous?"

"You treat your Air Force high-up rough," said Rosen.

"It's an inferiority complex," Lomas explained. "He can't help crabbing officials, brass bound and civilian are all the same to him. You'll have your share, Rosen."

"Still breakin' it gently," Reggie sighed. "Still evadin' answer to crucial questions."

"The Air Force wallah has not taken up all your points," said Lomas. "His answer is . . ."

"A lemon?" Rosen interrupted.

"He's convinced the man in the rick was a German agent who fired the rickyard."

"Convinced how? Inspiration from above?" Reggie asked, and Rosen laughed.

"He has a strongish case. The bombers came over very high and dived straight on Meon's works at Radbury—tank and aircraft engines—a major objective. They couldn't have made sure of it without the rickyard fire. So he had good reason from the first to believe the fire was not accidental, and finding a dead body among the ashes confirms him."

"You think so?" Reggie murmured. "Original belief fire was enemy action reasonable, yes. Finding burnt corpse—I wonder. And drowned girl. She does not interest the chaste brass hat?"

"He certainly hasn't dealt with her case. But, as I told you, there's no sign of any connection between her death and the fire."

"Except time and place. My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Among innumerable chances, chance of common sex motive

stands out. Drowned girl and burnt man—'sinning, sorrowing, despairing, body ruined, spirit wrecked'—or two in a triangle victims of jealous third—or——"

"Curb your shocking imagination. Reginald," Lomas rebuked him. "You complained I was indefinite. You are——"

"Oh, no. No. Complained you thought the facts definite when they were merely wonder and vague surmise. To resume. The burnt corpse, though unrecognised, existed somewhere previous to death. Anyone missing from the Radbury region?"

"Need you ask?" Lomas shrugged. "They don't know the total raid casualties yet. They'll never account for all the disappearances."

"I should not have asked. I grovel. Well. Let me try again. Had the Air Force intelligence suspected there were enemy agents about in Raddonshire before the raid?"

"Of course they had. An intelligence officer always suspects."

"Oh, yes. But I meant, suspected particular persons?"

"The suspicion seems to have been short of evidence."

Rosen jumped up. "I hand it you, Mr. Lomas, you break things so gently they don't break. Let me put 'em the way they hit me." He looked at Reggie. "Mr. Fortune is too polite to ask why the hell am I here, but he wasn't far off with the question is anyone missing around Radbury, and the straight answer will show him impacts wide and deep. Sir, in Raddonshire there are American troops, also Canadian and British. From a detention camp of ours two men held for robbery and assault on women escaped some while back, and have not been traced. The charges were brought by Canadian and British military police. There was feeling about that on our side, and it rose both sides after the get-away. I aim to be as fair as Mr. Lomas. I do not suggest your red caps framed 'em, or gave 'em any sort of raw deal. Our own people allow the two are tough guys, and the escape shows us slack with 'em. But after the raid on Radbury a buzz went all round these two started the rickyard fire, and with intent; they were pathfinders for the German planes. Now your side is fierce, ours resentful, Canucks and Tommies looking for chances to bite the doughboys in the stomach, and vice versa. We'll have hell with the lid off that way."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Raid Friday night. Sunday morning now. Buzz went round very quick."

"You said it." Rosen was pleased.

"That sort of loose talk does," Lomas told them.

"Loose? This buzz wasn't," Reggie protested. "Tight and

clear. Accusin' two men of particular crime, uncommon clever crime. On facts not discovered till Saturday by brass hat and his theory thereof."

"Sir, you have the fairest and most candid mind I ever met," Rosen smiled.

Reggie sank down in his chair. "Obvious inference, this extraordinary quick, clear, well-informed buzz came from brass hat."

"Sure," Rosen agreed heartily.

"Not at all," Lomas retorted. "It was common knowledge a body had been found in the rickyard. The Group Captain made no mention of American soldiers in his report. I dare say he'd never heard two were missing. He certainly didn't connect them with the fire. There can be no doubt the rumour was built up by the troops putting one story on top of another. You must have come across such rumours often enough, Rosen."

"No, sir. Never one with this reality and hitting power."

"The situation is dangerous, I agree. Don't make it worse by suspecting the Air Force intelligence officer played a spiteful trick."

"I am not hostile, believe me. I go the limit on everybody for everybody else, and all that. We're way off it in this Raddonsshire area. What I ask for is co-operative investigation of your Air Force facts and theories."

"You must realise no Service would submit its officers' work to investigation by another."

"You're saying we must head for an almighty smash because one officer can't be questioned."

A still, small voice came from the bundle which was Reggie. "Let dogs delight to bark and bite. Too much zeal. Not so much sense. Both right. Both wrong. Brass-hatted dignity won't stand investigation. No just cause we should abandon hope. Think again. Brass bound may have gone off the rails. It is their nature to. But several facts were not produced by any mess he made. Strikin' and probably crucial facts. The two tough guys escaped, and our troops got cross about it some time before the raid. Whoever fired the rickyard, whatever the purpose, if any, one thing certain, our troops would blame them and rage—as happened."

"This is Mr. Lomas's speech for the defence of the Group Captain. I heard it the first time."

"Oh, my Rosen. Clear your mind. A poor speech, but my own. Not defendin' Groupie. Can't you think of anyone else? Accusing hitherto unknown party—party who planned that the rickyard

fire should make bad blood worse between your doughboys and our troops—and has brought it off.”

“By Jake!” Rosen exclaimed. “You come down on my side. That’s swell. I was feeling after what you’ve given me, but I couldn’t get the shape. Who is your unknown party?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.” Reggie included Rosen and Lomas in one reproachful gaze. “Evidence from British and American detective efforts quite inadequate. Well, well.” He stood up bit by bit. “Me for the burnt corpse. Did you think of going to Radbury, Rosen?”

“Straight back from this conference. My hotel is the Crown. I’ll be seeing you. Thanks a lot.” Rosen swung out.

“The more we are together, the happier we shall be—or otherwise,” Reggie murmured.

“You need a chaperon, Reginald,” said Lomas. “I’ll give you Underwood. He knows Rosen’s little ways.”

“Quaint mind, the official mind. English official and U.S. official are brothers under their skins. Secretive instinct dominant—same like jackdaws. Who called the fire-brigade out to the fire?”

Lomas was startled. “Good Gad, how should I know?”

“By askin’. Which, I infer, you have not. Nothing attempted nothing done has earned a night’s repose.”

“It’s of no significance where the call came from. Anyone who saw the fire would naturally ring up the brigade.”

“My Lomas! Mustn’t talk like that. Unknown party planned fire. Unknown party, same or another, called out brigade, so it was not present in strength when the bombs fell on Radbury. Highly significant.”

“The brigade can tell you who sent the call. If there was any reason to suspect the sender I should have been told.”

“Reasons not much sought after down at Radbury. Heard from the man who owns the bombed works?”

“Meon? No. I’ve heard enough from the supply departments and Army and Air Force intelligence. They’re all on the jump. It was one of the key factories.”

“Does he live down there?”

“He’s a native. He has a house close to Radbury. He was there the night of the raid.”

“Nice for him,” said Reggie, and departed.

CHAPTER VI

CO-OPERATION

PEOPLE who stay at the Crown, in Radbury, keep early hours. By half-past eleven Rosen had been some time alone in the lounge. The arrival of Underwood roused him. "Hallo! Hallo! This is fine, brother. Now I know your folks are taking me seriously."

"It comes of their English sense of humour."

"The drinks are on me," Rosen grinned. "This hotel has a swell selection, warm beer or dilute whisky."

"Soda water," said Reggie behind him.

"Gosh!" Rosen jumped up. "That bad?"

"Simple life, my life. Quiet living, strict-kept pleasure, 'tis for this my nature yearns. Had genial time at the mortuary."

Through a decrepit waiter's shuffling they were silent.

"Happy days," said Reggie, and sipped his soda water. "No one will ever recognise burnt corpse by sight. Charred all over. Was male. Cause of death burning."

"That's definite?" Rosen asked.

"Oh, yes. Absolutely. Soot and ash in breathing passages. Demonstrate to American expert if you like."

"No, sir! What Mr. Fortune says goes with us."

"Too kind. Well. Decisive evidence corpse went into fire alive. How he went, why he went, why he stayed there, no evidence at all. May have gone to sleep on the rick drunk. It happens. May have been put into the fire unconscious from blow on head, spine or other injury. Which also happens. Not a sign of drink or violence, but there couldn't be. Charred deep. Inside roasted dry."

Underwood put down his beer. Rosen finished his whisky and said: "You're going for an open verdict. On your evidence my guess is murder."

"Possible guess. Probable guess. But only a guess."

"You leave it at that?"

"My dear chap. Oh, my dear chap! Always try out the probable. Then, if necessary, the possible." Reggie turned to Underwood. "What's the police record of civilians missing since the raid?"

"So far they know of forty odd men disappeared. A big cinema was hit. They've dug up a lot of remains that can't be pieced together, unidentifiable scraps. They expect more."

"Jigsaw puzzle, this case. With many bits hidden. Central bits. Some background, no foreground."

"What chance is there the police will work out what actually happened to all these chaps missing? One of 'em may have been burnt in the rick. Most of 'em were simply wiped out."

"Not a nice case," Reggie sighed. "Any news of the two tough guys, Rosen?"

"No, sir. They have vanished from the earth, for all we hear. And they may have at that."

"Casualties in the raid, you mean?" said Underwood.

"Possible. It would be fine if proved. Meanwhile the barometer's tumbling down. All camps stand by for storms."

"And so to bed," Reggie murmured. "Risin' early in the morning, we proceed to inspect rickyard. Come with us, Rosen, and see fair. . . ."

They drove through shattered streets, and saw a host of men making order out of the ruins of Meon's factory.

"I heard Meon was very hot," said Rosen. "I believe it now. Though I have used his cars."

The air was dank and chill over the drab, featureless flats, a pallid disc of sun in lowering cloud.

"Harsh country," Reggie complained. "There'll always be an England, but not here."

"This suits me all right," said Rosen. "It has space."

"Without form and void. Space between the worlds. Lift up your eyes to the hills. There is a hill," Reggie pointed to the blurred scarp of the Hartdean ridge.

"I take it from you," Rosen grinned. "But look at here. These flats got a lot of rain last night. Anything we might have found in the rickyard ashes will be washed out."

"Hopeful fellow." Reggie contemplated him with dreamy eyes.

Short of Marsh's cottage, Underwood turned the car from the lane into a cart track, and they were soon at the rickyard.

Two cars had arrived before them. Inspector Venn and the Group Captain stood on either side the gate, well away from each other. The Group Captain growled that they were late, and the whole yard a muck of mud. It was pretty wet, Venn told them.

"Oh, yes. Yes," Reggie agreed. "We're all wet, and our name is mud. As you say. However. Might show us where you picked up the corpse."

The Group Captain marched off in short, quick steps. "Like a running bird," Reggie murmured, as Venn strode out to snatch the lead.

"They're hellish jealous of each other," said Rosen. "And both of our butting in on them."

"Highly official, yes. However." Reggie strolled after them by a zigzag route. Ashes where each rick stood still kept some outline of its shape, but the rain had made them a dirty grey porridge which rose at the highest two or three feet above the black turf round it, and in which nothing could be distinguished. Yet Reggie gave each sunken, uniform mound careful study before he came near the Group Captain and Venn. Then the Group Captain barked: "What's the use of all that fuss now?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Reggie sweetly.

"You've been wasting your time and mine!"

"Oh, no. No. Must get facts. Even if negative."

Venn asserted himself. "I went over the whole yard personally, Mr. Fortune, and you can take it from me there was nothing like a clue. Only the corpse in these ashes, and I had the whole of them sifted."

"Corpse quite invisible till dug out? Ashes covered the whole of it?"

"Entirely," the Group Captain growled. "The fellow wouldn't have been found till God knows when if I hadn't probed the ashes of every rick."

"My dear chap! Splendid. And those—near the corpse at time you dug it out?" Reggie pointed to some half-burnt pieces of wood.

The Group Captain looked at them and him with contempt. "They were where they are now, more or less. The exact spot has no significance. Anyone can see they were parts of a ladder."

"I did. Yes. Well?"

The Group Captain was dumb.

"There's generally a ladder or two in a rickyard, Mr. Fortune," Venn informed him.

"I have noticed it. Point is, why a ladder by rick in which corpse got burnt?"

"Oh, I see. Perhaps you couldn't tell, but this rick was old hay," Venn expounded with condescension and pleasure. "The farmer had started to cut it, and left the ladder handy."

"Things would be like that," said Reggie.

"What the devil do you mean?" The Group Captain scowled at him.

"Top of rick cut off. Makin' cosy corner, accessible by ladder. Corpse may have gone to sleep there or been dumped there for burning. Either alternative would solve minor problem, how

corpse got so thoroughly burnt. All major problems remain." Reggie gazed across the rickyard. "Any evidence where fire started?"

"You will not determine precisely," the Group Captain eyed him with distrust.

"You can be sure it began in one of the ricks just here." Venn was confident. "From the direction of the wind, nor'-west."

Reggie wandered away.

"Nice work," Rosen struck in. "Giving us a fix to this one which burnt the corpse."

"Most likely," said Venn.

"Then the corpse did not raise the fire. You don't light ricks way up."

The Group Captain turned on him. "That's no argument, sir, only reckless assertion."

"And what are you asserting?"

"Don't play the fool. A rick may be fired at any point, and blaze up."

"Sure. Now tell me why the poor devil climbed high to start the fire?"

"Your conjecture he did has no foundation in fact. Why you make it is your affair, not mine."

"You suggest I'm twisting things. No, sir. Let's get together. This buzz two doughboys raised the fire has gone too big all round."

"I know nothing about that."

"The origin's plain black chance. Our job is to stop the break of bad trouble. Are you with me?"

"I can promise you every assistance in investigation."

"Fine. Now what is your idea of the corpse here? Do you make him victim or villain?"

"You have all the facts available. They will not justify a definite answer either way. If you want my opinion, I think the fellow was a German agent firing the ricks to guide the bombers and got caught in the blaze of this one. Whether he was an American is mere guess-work. The only basis for the rumour is the escape of those two men from your detention camp. Without that, it would never have occurred to anyone Americans might be concerned."

"I couldn't ask for straighter talk. Thanks a lot. I never was neutral as you'd notice. You'll find me co-operative plus."

While their dialogue thus developed through storm to peace, and continued in amiabilities, effusive on Rosen's side, Reggie strolled along the north-west side of the yard from which, according to Venn, the fire started.

He passed by the separate ash mounds, he loitered round them, scanning scattered smears of ash and wet, scorched grass. Underwood followed. Close to the hedge, some twenty yards from the rick in which the corpse was burnt, he stopped and squatted down on his heels to pore over wet, scorched grass. Underwood joined him. He looked sideways with a small, twisted smile. "Well?"

"Good Lord!" Underwood muttered.

"I wonder." Reggie stood up, and called plaintively: "You fellows might come along."

Rosen and the Group Captain arrived together, Venn close behind. "Look!" Reggie pointed at something white in the grass.

"What the devil is it?" The Group Captain bent over it and then let out a laugh. "Dead man's effects!"

"Oh! From mouth of corpse?" Reggie was not amused. "You think so?"

"I hadn't thought about that one way or the other. You misunderstand me, sir. Any fellow's false teeth are dead man's effects in the slang phrase, don't you know?"

"Had the corpse lost a denture?" Rosen asked.

"No. Natural teeth all present," said Reggie, "and better than most."

"Then what is your point?"

"My dear chap. Oh, my dear chap! Several points. Owner of false front teeth, upper jaw, shed 'em here. Not adjacent to rick that burnt corpse. But others close by. Any of which may have been fired first."

"I don't get one point. There's nothing to show when the owner lost his denture."

"Fellow seldom drops his denture casual and by chance. Sort of loss a fellow notices. Why didn't this fellow pick up his?"

"You tell me."

"I should say he was too busy. Havin' a scrap with another fellow, and a lot more ricks to fire."

"Let me get this. How's it read off? The denture was knocked out of the fire-raiser's mouth by a fellow trying to stop him. Then what? Do you make the corpse not the fire-raiser, but the other fellow?"

"Provisional hypothesis, yes."

"The other fellow got it in the neck from the fire-raiser, and was then put up on the rick to be cremated?"

"Any objection?" Reggie murmured.

"Damned clever," said the Group Captain.

"Fine," said Rosen. "The one flaw is, you can't fix when the denture was dropped. If on the night of the fire or before, why didn't the inspector and the Group Captain find it next day?"

"I searched everywhere myself," Venn protested.

"So finding it now we can only say it was dropped here any old time since the day after the night before."

"Oh, my Rosen! Fellow came along subsequent to spit out his false teeth for us? You don't believe that. Nobody could. Look at the place. Last night's rain washed grass clean of burnt bits and ashes previously concealing teeth. Which are thus shown up."

"All right. I climb down. Though I wouldn't go into court on that myself."

"Not goin' yet." Reggie made a half turn. "Another point. See? What do you make of it?"

Rosen picked up something flat and round which gleamed dull. "This is a United States Army button," he said, and his grave eyes were fierce.

"Thread and scrap of cloth on bent shank," Reggie murmured. "Indicatin' torn from tunic by violence."

"I'm with you, so far. Where do you go next?"

"Follow the gleam. Probable presence of fellow wearin' American uniform in rickyard at recent date."

"Your gleam isn't all that good. It shows a doughboy might have been around some time, but no more."

"Oh, yes. Shows American uniform probably met with violence."

"The hell of a lot. The sort a fellow meets with catching his coat on this or that."

"Could be, yes. Any false teeth in the mouths of the two escaped Americans?"

Rosen glared at him. "I thought I had a full description. I was wrong. I ought to have known you'd want their dental history. If we've got it I'll hand it you good and quick."

"My dear chap. Never can tell. Let Underwood run you into Radbury."

"You're staying here?"

"Don't worry. He'll be back for me in no time."

"I thank you," said Rosen, looking the contrary, and went off with Underwood.

The Group Captain drew Reggie away from Venn and administered rebuke. "You were rather short with our American friend, Mr. Fortune. He must fight for his own fellows, and he put up a good show."

"Oh, yes. Yes." Reggie gazed at the choleric countenance, which had become friendly, with mild surprise and amusement. "Rosen's first-class, glad you take him that way."

"He's the sort of fellow we want on our side of the show. I shouldn't mind opening my head to him. You kept a good deal under your hat."

"Not me, no. Gave him all the points I see."

"But you held back your interpretation of them."

"Held nothing. Nothing to hold. Can't interpret 'em. Can you?"

"I still think it probable one of these American rascals was a German agent, set the ricks on fire to guide the bombers, and burnt himself. Some of your new points confirm me. But I must admit Rosen has a right to say they're not strong, and others raise doubts."

"He has, yes. On the whole darker and darker yet. However." Reggie turned towards the impatient and curious Venn. "How far to place girl was drowned?"

"About half a mile, sir."

"My ghost!" Reggie moaned. "Show me." He gave the startled Group Captain a woeful "Good-bye."

CHAPTER VII

VENN'S VIEW

TRUDGING along the muddy path from the rickyard to the brook Reggie suffered in silence a lecture by Inspector Venn on his sagacious conduct of the case of Carrie Marsh, but felt he would say something under treatment.

They reached the plank bridge. Reggie stood still and looked at the many paths across the flats converging to it, the two tracks diverging on the other side, and asked: "Where's the girl's home?"

"You can't see it from here, it's over a mile down the track that keeps low over there."

"Oh, Peter!" Reggie sighed.

"There's no need you should go to it, Mr. Fortune. I've given you all you could get from her grandfather."

"My dear chap. Thanks. Where did grandfather find her?"

"This way." Venn went on through the pathless long grass

beside the brook. "He told me he found her lying half under water close against the bank here, caught on that clump of weeds."

"Iris," Reggie murmured. "Leaves broken."

"They were then. He said she was swept in by the stream."

"It could be."

"There's a lot more water coming down to-day."

"Oh. Not enough stream to sweep her in when you saw her?"

"I didn't mean that, quite enough, I dare say; anyhow quite enough to drown her, it runs deep all the time; I was only putting the difference so you should see things just as they were."

"Good man. Any other little snag in grandfather's story?"

"I think he told the truth about finding her here, and pulling her out. You can't properly distinguish now, but the bank looked quite right for what he said, and nothing else. In my view he was straight as far as he went, but he might have gone a good deal further."

"Suspect him of knowing how she got in the water?"

"I don't consider that quite justified. He hurried to give information at once, and practically told me he believed there'd been foul play. It's hardly credible he would act so if he was guilty. On the other hand, it's not much more credible the girl went out o' night regular and him not know—as he swore he didn't—anything of where she went, and who she went with. The people on the farm she worked at bear him out she never had a boy, she wasn't that kind."

"Some girls aren't till they are."

"And then they go head over ears."

"It happens. Yes." Reggie looked back at the bridge and the paths and tracks on each side. "Journeys end in lovers' meeting. Good spot to meet a lover coming from anywhere. She came more than a mile. Hypothetical lover might have come with her. Far from probable. Therefore also improbable he came from Radbury. He'd have passed her door if he had, what?"

"No, sir, he wouldn't, not if he knew the country and was walking. There's a field path much shorter than the road out by the rickyard, and then on as you and me came to the bridge."

"My only aunt!" Reggie gazed at the paths with wide, plaintive eyes. "An unlimited hypothetical."

"I don't take the view he was a Radbury man," Venn made haste to explain. "The town lads aren't so fond of walking they come out here in the wilds for girls. They have all they want where they live. Carrie Marsh, being on a farm, had next to no

chance of picking up any Radbury boy. Besides, if she did get a boy who was all right she'd have him at home."

"Hypothesis of hypothetical lover thus limited to males not livin' at Radbury and not respectable. Yes. Argument sound. Go on with it. Further limitation to particular male would be interestin'."

"You must bear in mind those American soldiers, Mr. Fortune. The charges against them were violence to a woman. They escaped, and they haven't yet been traced. The most likely place in the district for them to hide is the hills up there, and the Hartdean woods, you see."

"Oh! Ah!" Reggie looked at the steep slope and the woods about it and beyond. "Lonely?"

"Beyond Hartdean House, where Sir Thomas Meon lives, just close above, you wouldn't come across another for miles. It struck me from the first those two might very well have laid for Carrie Marsh, used her to get 'em things, had their fun with her, and then wiped her out. I hinted to her grandfather soldiers were concerned. He didn't see it. Any search of the woods I could put up would have been hopeless. But your discovery of the American army button in the rickyard proves my view. Those two crooks, or one, was there at the time of the fire, that is round about the time Carrie Marsh was drowned here—as he went to the rickyard, or from it, she got in his way."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Allurin' hypothesis. Links male death with female. Great temptation. Simplifies things. But still inadequate hypothesis. Two American soldiers. Only one dead male. What's become of the other?"

"I take it he got away, and is lying low as before."

"Which could be. But raises various and peculiar difficulties. Two soldiers. Did one start fire and burn the other? Why? Did both take a hand in drowning Carrie? Was Carrie drowned before fire was started or after?"

"You can't say for certain," said Venn.

"No. Into the night go one and all, hypothetical Americans and actual Carrie. However. Faint yet pursuin'. What time did Carrie leave home?"

"I told you." Venn was annoyed. "The nearest I could get from her grandfather is she may have gone out any time between clearing away supper and the bombing. That gives you from eight o'clock, or earlier, till past nine."

"Well, well. What time was the fire first observed?"

"I don't recall I ever heard precisely."

"Oh. But someone called the fire-brigade."

"Yes, the brigade had a call, of course. That don't tell you anything. None of the cottages hereabouts are on the phone, and there's no farm near. The fire must have been well alight before anyone rang up."

"Well, well. Brigade must know when the call came, and where from. You might find out."

"If you like," said Venn sulkily.

"Don't be cross. Go to it. Crucial points, who was first alarmed, and how."

Without another word Venn strode off.

CHAPTER VIII

BAND OF BROTHERS

CONTEMPLATING the brook and the banks, Reggie walked slowly upstream some distance, then looked at the woods, and from them to Hartdean hill and the gleam of the windows of Meon's house. Still more slowly he returned, lingered by the bridge, surveyed again the paths on each side.

He went back to the rickyard pensive, but so fast for him that Underwood, waiting in the car, was facetious. "I say, this is a rush job, Mr. Fortune. Are you through here?"

"Mind blank," Reggie moaned. "Want my lunch."

"Well, you have made 'em all happy," said Underwood as he drove out of the yard. "Venn's right up on his hind legs. I asked after you, and he told me his rank and length of service and pushed off. Rosen was short, but dropping vitriol on British ways at large. And I suppose the Air Force officer let you know what American and English detectives are good for, and where an expert should put his stuff."

"Groupie had civil moments. But nobody loves me," Reggie sighed. "However. Greet the unseen with a cheer. After lunch."

They had not finished when Rosen marched to their table. "My dear chap!" Reggie gazed at him with wide eyes, and held out the menu.

"I pass," said Rosen, but sat down. "Let me tell you, there is no dental record of those two guys. The sergeant and men in their section believe neither had any false teeth. That's the nearest we can get."

"Grateful and comfortin' as far as it goes. Never expected false teeth would get us home."

"The hell you didn't. You were all out on 'em to make a case against our boys."

"Oh, my Rosen! Contrariwise. Tryin' every fair means to clear the dam' fellows. Drop their teeth. What about the rest of them? You said you had full descriptions."

"Sure. Alfred Roget, twenty-five, black hair and eyes, dark complexion, clean shaven. Jeremiah Nolan, twenty-one, brown hair, blue eyes, high colour, small red moustache. Both look older than their age."

"Height and weight?"

"Roget five foot six and 170 pounds, Nolan five foot ten and 152."

"Well, well. Roget thick-set, Nolan slight. Neither can be corpse, who was barely five foot four, and not much more than eight stone when alive."

"Skinny little chap," said Underwood.

"Oh, yes. Yes. The one hope. Is there anybody missing who was such a poor creature? We might follow that up."

"I'll go." Underwood gave him a knowing look and went.

"Well, this is all right by me," said Rosen. "You hand out your results full and fair, whether for you or against you."

"No for and no against to date. Can't even tell what would be which."

"I don't get it. We have established the man burnt was not one of my two boys, and the only scrap of evidence an American soldier was ever in the rickyard is that army button, which is no evidence at all."

"As you say. Results wholly bafflin'."

"Pardon me. They are not. They are all against your theory those boys raised the fire."

"My Rosen! Never had such a theory. No material and too much. Only followed wherever led by gleam of elusive meaning in the jungle. Oh, I say! Don't leave me. It's Venn, and he's cross too. Cancel each other out, there's a good chap. Hallo, Venn. Fast worker. Sit down and have something."

Venn did not drink between meals, thank you.

"But you needn't mind talking. Mr. Rosen wants all we can give him about the fire."

Venn cleared his throat and turned emphatically to Reggie. "The fire-brigade received a phone message at nine-twenty-three on Saturday evening stating Cobbley rickyard was on fire, and

immediately sent out two engines and one hose van. So far as ascertained no one had seen the fire earlier. The rickyard belongs to Cobbley Farm which is two miles off. Actually the farmer did not observe the fire till the bombs made him look out."

"Same like grandfather Marsh," Reggie murmured. "Curious and interestin'. Any questions, Rosen?"

"On the time problem. Tell me, inspector. Was the fire blazing good and well when the brigade booked the call at nine-twenty-three?"

"I am informed the firemen, as they went out, judged it large."

"And when did the bombs begin to fall?"

"At approximately half-past nine."

"So the interval between the fire getting big enough to show up and the bombs was short?"

"Quite short."

"Then how do you make out the bombers were guided by the fire?"

"I make out nothing of the kind. In my view they were not. The suggestion the fire was lit to guide them comes from the Air Force."

"Thanks a lot," said Rosen.

"Yes, good and clear," Reggie murmured. "Give Underwood a hand with the list of missing, Venn, will you? He needs it."

As Venn made an impressive departure: "What about the Air Force now?" Rosen asked.

"I wonder. We all mean so well. Ought to be band of brothers."

"Are you still for the enemy agent stuff?"

"Mind is open on your two tough guys. Remember my little speech accusin' an unknown party—party who planned fire and hotted up trouble between your troops and our troops. Still like that speech though party remains unknown."

"I liked it all right," said Rosen. "It brought you down on our side. But where is it taking you now? You've made the unknown burnt corpse a murdered man."

"Always believe evidence. Wherever it takes me."

"All you have don't take you any place. Are you hoping you'll work out who the corpse was?"

"Hope, yes. Worked out some of the fellows it wasn't."

"I'll be seeing you." Rosen left him.

CHAPTER IX

A SINGLE HAIR

AFTER some telephone conversation, Reggie drove off by himself to the foot of Hartdean hill. There he stopped and took bearings. The road had made a long bend from Radbury, it went through pleasant combes south of the hill, it was crossed at right angles by a track, the track from the bridge where the rickyard path and all the other paths converged, where Carrie Marsh went to die. Not very far away. He could see the brook gleam. Two hundred yards in a straight line.

He drove on through the combes, but soon turned from the high road into a private road which swung back and went up in an easy, slanting ascent to the south front of Hartdean House. Again he surveyed the landscape. Track, paths, brook and the flats on which the rickyard stood were all out of sight. Though not further away from the house than from the foot of the hill.

Another car came round the house as he walked to the door, which opened before he rang, and let out a man in a mighty hurry.

"Sir Thomas Meon?" Reggie enquired. "My name's Fortune. Lomas phoned you I was coming."

"I can't give you a minute. Lady Meon will see you."

Meon made for his car in which one man already sat behind the chauffeur.

Reggie rang the bell and went into the hall, and told the butler that Lady Meon expected him. He was given ample time to meditate on her husband.

Common big business. Superlative of the ordinary male of the herd. At best. Below that, on the form he showed. Brain not working well. Nerves not under control. Call him a tired man and worried. He had reason to be with his factory smashed and a lot of his people killed. Might count it for righteousness he'd worn himself out. But why did he run?

He must have heard the rumour that enemy agents guided the raid. He might not believe it, but he couldn't be certain, and he should be keen to have proof one way or the other—if he was straight. Yet the moment he heard from the Criminal Investigation Department Mr. Fortune would call on him he had urgent business elsewhere. Sudden and peculiar urgency, considerin' the need for the master mind at his bombed works. And he didn't

even know what Mr. Fortune wanted from him—if he was straight.

An error, a gross error to warn him Mr. Fortune wanted something? On the whole, no. Evasion put him on the list. Urgent business gave new and interesting lead.

Reggie's meditations ranged over that till the butler took him away to the library. Handsome room in its sombre style, good proportions, mahogany chests and bookcases well designed, almost black, stately show of bindings. Not a room lived in, books not used.

Lady Meon surprised him. As Meon turned him over to her, he expected she would be overpowering or futile. One of those two kinds was the usual wife for the Meon kind. But a charming little woman, gracious, dainty, with subtle colour harmonies in chestnut hair and grey-blue eyes and cream complexion, sensitive, thoughtful face—what made her marry Meon?

"Mr. Fortune?" she asked, and her eyes smiled. "I beg your pardon. How absurd of me. I had expected somebody rather different."

"What was the hoped for difference?"

"I didn't hope for it. You may have a compliment. I thought Mr. Fortune would be grim."

"Surely Meon didn't suggest that?"

"Heavens, no. I can't imagine him thinking anyone grim. He simply said Mr. Fortune was coming to ask about Friday night and I could tell you as well as he all that happened here."

"Do you mind? Now you know I'm not grim."

"Although you're not grim. In spite of your reputation." She sat down by a window and made room for Reggie beside her. "It is going to be a very long story, it begins anywhere and ends nowhere."

"The best kind of story," Reggie murmured. "Includin' all that don't seem to mean anything as well as what does."

"On Friday some people came down for the week-end . . ." she began, and Reggie enjoyed the sight of her and the sound of her with dreamy admiration. Pleasant woman. Joyous and inviting, calm and aloof.

And Meon said she could tell as well as he all that happened. Trusting her absolutely—or knowing she didn't know what he kept dark? He wouldn't have told the story she did in her way if he told it at all. She liked hearing herself talk. But not to show off, never a flash in the gentle, easy phrases. Every phrase considered and clear, general effect vague: talk of a woman who

studied things and people but from some distance, with equal eye, loving not, hating not. Challenging woman.

Well. Challenge could wait till a more convenient season. Keep the mind on the object—not the woman but the story she told.

People at Hartdean House on Friday: besides the Meons and Major Norton, army liaison with the great man, and Miss Buckland and Mrs. Denlan, widow with three-year-old son, Tony, relations of sorts, Max Falkenstein, American technician. Frederic Launay, Canadian manufacturer, Gustav Toll, nationality unstated, all three over on war business which introduced them to Meon. He knew them quite well, but only Falkenstein had been at Hartdean before, going over the works.

Tone of story suggested Lady Meon didn't know any of the three well, but found them agreeable: tolerated the female relations; thought Norton feeble; inclined to admire her husband.

Coincidence of a league of nations party with the raid interesting and tiresome. Meon's taking the poor creature Norton away so he couldn't be questioned curious.

Hallo! Curiouser and curiouser. Reggie let no sign he thought that break through his dreamy benign attention as she told how the small boy came from bed to the dinner party, frightened by screams in the dark, so he said, and Norton picked him up and comforted him, and his mother took him back to bed again.

Lady Meon paused. Curious also. First stop in the story. Expected some comment.

"Quaint persons, children, aren't they?" said Reggie. "Never had one myself."

"Nor have I," said Lady Meon. "Some people who have are devoted to them."

What did that mean? Childless woman jealous of Tony's mother? Mother unkind to Tony? Tony a tiresome brat? Wait for more.

After another pause Lady Meon went on. No one at the dinner table had heard a scream. Sir Thomas sent the butler to ask the servants if they had. They had not, but they had just seen what seemed a large fire.

"Oh!" Reggie let his dreamy eyes open wide. "The rickyard fire. And then?"

The question did not shorten the winding course of Lady Meon's story. She had never watched a fire anywhere, but numbers of people seemed to enjoy looking at them. She couldn't remember a fire near Hartdean before. She supposed there was no reason why one should not have fires in the country, only one didn't

expect them. Sir Thomas went off at once with Major Norton to find out what place was burning. He couldn't see from the dining-room or the front, it was on the Ladywell side. He always took any trouble of importance, and indeed of no importance, that he met with into his own hands. Some women had the same habit, but it was rather rare among men, wasn't it? Miss Buckland took Mr. Falkenstein to watch the fire. Mrs. Denlan, of course, was sitting upstairs with Tony. The other men stayed, and Mr. Toll asked what could have caught fire in the fields. Lady Meon didn't know, but anything on the Ladywell side they would be able to see from the library, so they went there, and they saw the rickyard blazing.

"And called out the Radbury fire-brigade?" Reggie asked sharply.

No, Major Norton telephoned while they were still at the window. Sir Thomas sent him, of course. But Mr. Toll took the greatest interest in the fire, whether the farmer could save anything. He thought he saw a man in the rickyard, and though Mr. Launay didn't they both hurried off to help him.

"Sportsmen," said Reggie. "By themselves?"

Yes, it was rather fine of them, they weren't young, they couldn't tell where the others had gone. She didn't see a man herself. She tried for some time, and then the bombing began and Sir Thomas came back and told her the works were hit, and he and Major Norton drove into Radbury at once.

"But the others?" Reggie asked. "Miss Buckland and Mr. Max Falkenstein. Where had they gone?"

"I don't know where exactly." An undertone of distaste for the ways of that maid with a man broke into Lady Meon's gentle voice. "They went to watch the fire. It was late when they came back."

"Havin' assisted Mr. Toll and Mr. Launay at the fire?"

"No, I imagine they never went far enough to see them."

"Did Toll and Launay find a man anywhere about?"

"They found no one at all, they stayed trying to save some of the ricks, and after a long while two or three people came from the farm and helped, but it was hopeless. When they went away on Saturday morning we had not heard that a man had been burnt to death. Do you think he was the man Mr. Toll saw from the window here?"

"Not certain Toll did see a man. You didn't. Launay didn't. If Toll did see one, no evidence the man he saw was the man burnt."

Lady Meon seemed to be looking at things far away. "It makes

no real difference," she said slowly. "Whoever the dead man was, he died in dreadful pain. I am absurd, but I want to believe Mr. Toll didn't see him, he wasn't there when I looked."

"From this window." Reggie stood up and gazed out. The grey-black patch which had been the rickyard was some half mile off in a straight line, north of east, the bridge over the brook much nearer, almost due north, just below the house, less than two hundred yards as crows fly, as screams come through the air. Lady Meon hadn't thought of that—or had she? Some interest in the dead man, marked lack of interest in the dead girl. However. Subtle and discursive woman. Might be leading up to it. Give her her head. "How big was the fire when you first looked?"

She rose and stood beside him. "The ashes are horrible now, even if one didn't think of the man. They are cruel and mocking. When I looked on Saturday there was a great blaze. I remember I felt some sort of excitement at the power of the flames. What a confession, to be fascinated by fire burning ricks! I really had come out of that ridiculous trance before the bombs fell, but I don't know that I ever found myself quite so futile. I couldn't be of any use anywhere. I went up to Tony and his mother and stayed some time, though they didn't need me in the least. The bombers never came very near Hartdean, and the raid seemed shorter than some of those in London—but poor Radbury! As soon as Tony was asleep I went down again. Miss Buckland and Mr. Falkenstein were in the lounge. When I told her Sir Thomas and Major Norton had gone to the Radbury works Mr. Falkenstein said he would join them, but I hardly think he meant it, and he didn't go, he stayed with her after I went up to bed. From the landing I saw Mr. Toll and Mr. Launay going into the lounge. I didn't want a party again, I didn't want to hear about the rickyard fire. I wanted to know what had happened to Radbury. It is the other side of the house from my room, but we can see the works from the study, so I went there. I couldn't see them at all, only huge clouds of yellow smoke that didn't move through they glowed and the air smelt of burning. I wasn't able to think, I suppose I was dazed, as people say, things were so strange. One little thing, the moment I came into the study I noticed the curtains were moving, not drawn quite together, a casement was open."

"Well, well. Who does the study black out?"

"Margot, Miss Buckland. Since the war she has been Sir Thomas's private secretary for personal affairs."

Could that be what her ladyship was leading up to? Test her. "Had things in the study been taken or meddled with?"

"Nothing had been disturbed at all, as far as we can tell."

We—implying Meon, had gone over things and with suspicion. Did he tell her ladyship to put that across or was it her private spite? Try again. "Has Miss Buckland fallen down on the black out before?"

"Not that we know of, and if she had Sir Thomas would have known, he is particular, and he generally works in the study after dinner."

"But Friday night he wasn't going to. Open window is odd. May I have a look at the study?"

"Please, if you wish. We hope you will do anything, and ask any questions you want."

There were innumerable questions in Reggie's mind as he followed her upstairs. He asked only one of them. "Have all the week-end party gone?"

"Mr. Falkenstein and Mr. Toll and Mr. Launay left on Saturday morning. I pressed them to stay, of course, but you may imagine they preferred not. Miss Buckland is in Radbury for the day, I believe. She took Mrs. Denlan with her."

Departure of three men natural and proper. Women's absence might be natural also: to relieve raid victims. But my lady didn't say they were: which suggested suspicion. Not for the first time over Margot Buckland, though new over Mrs. Denlan. Their absence gave her ladyship a free hand. Yet she couldn't have arranged it, nor Meon either. The women were off before Meon heard he was coming.

Study on the first floor. Good working room, spacious and not much furniture. One big desk. One photograph on it. Not her ladyship. Young airman, much like Meon—before swollen.

"That is Sir Thomas's son, Michael," she explained. "My stepson. He was killed by a crash on an exercise. They couldn't discover the cause. There was not enough left."

Bitter though so quiet. Needn't have given the uncomfortable details. "Too bad," said Reggie, and moved towards the windows. "Which is the one you found open?" She pointed. "Oh, yes." Wide prospect east and north—rickyard, across the flats to Radbury, brook, paths each side, bridge, place where Carrie Marsh was drowned.

Many possibilities. Margot Buckland left that one window open and didn't draw the curtains right across. Somebody opened it to look out when Carrie screamed, or at the fire or at the bombing. Who? No one heard screams but the small Tony. The whole party—except him and his mother—saw the fire and the bombing

from the ground floor or outside. But any one of 'em might have opened the window before. A servant at any time. Why? Casual look-see before fire. Later, natural curiosity. Some risk in looking from master's room, and no special advantage, except that a signal out of that particular first floor window would carry well to the bridge and the rickyard. First floor. Easy climb up the house wall. Sort of casement window anyone outside could open easily, and get in and get what he wanted, but leaving by the window could not fasten it from outside. Which accounted for almost all stated facts. Though her ladyship said nothing in the study had been disturbed as far as they could tell. Not difficult for a skilful operator to open Meon's desk, go through his papers and leave all in order. However, unfastened window might be a fake by one of the house party, to indicate the study had been entered that night from outside. Sham burglar. Dear old trick. By whom? Only Lady Meon and Mrs. Denlan stayed inside after the rickyard fire had been seen. But no one could have counted on that before. Which left 'em all equally suspect. If the open window was a fake.

Reggie leaned out to gaze at the terrace below, and the wall, examined the window sill and the latch, then drew the dark green curtains slowly, a small gap between them. "Like this when you found them?" he asked.

"I can't be quite sure, but they are almost as they were," said Lady Meon.

Reggie studied them, pulled them back and rearranged them. While he was thus turned from her he took from about shoulder high in the dark green folds a single hair, some two inches long, blue-grey. "Well, well." He swung round. "Perplexin', this open window business. Don't seem to mean anything. Still, as Meon is sure no harm was done you can call it irrelevant. How's the small boy?"

That startled her. "Thank you. He wasn't ill. I didn't know I made you think he was."

"Made me think illness might be the cause of his hearing screams no one else heard."

"He is rather delicate and nervous, perhaps. I can hardly judge, I have had so little to do with children. Anyone may wake up fancying a sound."

"Oh, yes, yes. Or hearing real sound, unheard by others. Where is his bedroom?"

"On the next floor."

"I wonder. May I have a look—though his mother's out?"

"If you wish. There is no need to wait for Avice."

Following Lady Meon up the next flight of stairs, Reggie put that blue-grey hair in an envelope in his pocket-book.

CHAPTER X

WHAT TONY HEARD

"THIS is the old nursery," said Lady Meon. "Tony naturally slept here. It has not been much changed."

Odd how she kept explaining spontaneous without explaining. Why produce all that? Apparently to rub in Meon had a child by his first wife, none by her, his dead son used that room and now it passed to a child with no claim, except he was Meon's grand-nephew.

Decent nursery—for Queen Victoria's first babies—on the small side—by the place of the one window, no doubt room had been larger and divided to make night and day nurseries at more recent date.

Must be just about over Meon's study. Same aspect more or less east. Reggie looked out. Oh, no. Quite a bit nearer the north end of that east wing of the house. Close above the steep descent to the brook.

He turned. "Does Tony have his window shut at night, Lady Meon?"

"None of the bedroom windows are shut in the black out. Avice may shut his herself. I can't remember that I ever noticed whether she does."

"Not when you came up to see how he was after the alarms on Friday night?"

"I cannot remember. The nursery didn't feel close."

"Curtains swaying at all?"

"I dare say I should not have noticed if they were, it would have been natural in a bedroom. But why do you ask?"

"To find out whether Tony heard real screams. No scream in the house, no one this side of the house at the time. But if his window was open he would easily hear a scream from down there—look." She came to the window. "A girl was drowned down there round about the time of the screams. Didn't you know?"

"Everyone knows a girl was found in Ladywell brook the day

after the raid. I never dreamed there could be any connection between . . ." She stopped.

The door was opening slowly. A small boy's face peered round it. Wide face, full forehead, eyes wide apart—like the photo of Meon's dead son, like Meon—though timid shy.

"Come on in," Reggie laughed. "My name's Fortune and yours is Tony Denlan. Now we're friends."

"How do you do?" the boy said, and let Reggie take his hand, but looked at Lady Meon. "I thought it was mamma in here, Aunt Florence."

"Mother isn't back yet, dear. Where have you been?"

"Greggy took me out for a walk, but I got cold."

"Who is Greggy?" Reggie asked.

"Gregson," said Lady Meon. "My maid."

"I hate walking," said Reggie.

Tony gazed at him shyly, but with approval, and told him: "She's nice, she let me come in soon to paint."

"I say! That's fun. I'm not much good at painting but I love it. Do show me yours."

Tony gave Lady Meon an anxious glance. "Would mamma mind?"

"No, dear, mother will be pleased when I tell her."

So mother wasn't to be told. Did Tony understand that? He scurried off, almost the normal small boy, in front of her ladyship, leaving doors for Reggie to shut; fussed round the jumbled mess on the table in the next room; sat down and painted earnestly as if he had forgotten all about them.

Reggie cleared farm buildings from an easy chair for Lady Meon, farm animals from one of the chairs at the table for himself, and moved it along beside Tony. He was painting a quadruped of his own design: four legs for certain, one head, one body, one tail: separately and altogether like no creature yet discovered. Likeness not Tony's aim but emotion, state of soul. Psychoanalyst would do wonders with it.

"Are you fond of dogs?" Reggie asked.

"This isn't a real dog," said Tony, making the quadruped piebald with an ultramarine patch on its yellow ochre body and admiring the effect. "Merlin and Monarch don't mean any harm, but they're red."

"Two setters at the south lodge," Lady Meon explained.

"Oh, yes," said Reggie, wondering why Tony was against red, and whether he saw the red light in her chestnut hair. "Blue is a pretty colour."

"I think it's booful." Tony finished the blue patch. "Wouldn't you like a dog like that?"

"Rather. Do you paint cats too?"

"No. Horses and cows and sheep. There aren't any cats here."

"Too bad. But haven't you a cat at home?"

"Mamma had a kitten once, but it wasn't nice, and it went."

"Are you a cat lover, Mr. Fortune?" Lady Meon asked.

"By nature and grace. I was born humble of soul, and they deign to keep me meek."

"I had no idea cats were so amusing."

"Nor are they. Didn't you ever tell Tony how the owl and the pussy cat went to sea, to sea in a pea-green boat?"

"Is it a story?" Tony asked. "Aunt Florence doesn't tell stories."

"It would have made a fine picture. You ought to paint it."

"I don't know how. I know about cats, but not owls."

"You must have heard them down here in the country. They fly at night and screech."

"Do they?" Tony was all eyes. "What sort of scream?"

"Too-whit, too-whoo."

"That isn't the sort of screams I heard."

"Well, make the sort you did hear."

"I couldn't. Mamma said I didn't hear anything."

"Was your window open?"

"Mamma shut the window when she took me back to bed."

"No more noise then?"

"I thought there was great big bangs, but mamma said not, and not to worry."

"Oh, yes. And after the bangs, with the window shut, you didn't hear a sound?"

Tony made no reply. "You remember my coming to say good night," Lady Meon prompted him. "We did hear a whistle from a long way off, then nothing more at all, everything was quite quiet."

Tony gave her an uncomfortable look, and said slowly: "After you and mamma went away it wasn't, not real quiet. It kept on tap, tap, click clack."

"Fuss fuss, I know," Reggie smiled. "Lots of houses do. I want to see some more of your painting." Tony did not answer, but pushed a book at him. He admired, he criticised, he was puzzled so properly that he gained favour, and they talked about horses and cows and the inadequate colours of nature and the ideal colours of the paint-box till Gregson brought Tony's tea.

"You are clever with children, Mr. Fortune," said Lady Meon as she gave him tea in a small green and gold drawing-room.

"Oh, no. No. Simply like 'em, that's all."

"I am not sure I do. They rather frighten me. What did you think of Tony?"

"Nice child. Mind of his own."

"He has indeed. He seems to live in a world of his own too."

"I wonder."

"He is extraordinarily fanciful."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Do you believe he really heard screams?"

"It could be."

"But he told us he heard noise afterwards when I am sure everything was quiet."

"Houses talk, as I said."

"What could make tapping, clacking noises?"

"Depends on the house."

"Tony has never spoken of them till to-day."

"Curious."

"Perhaps being asked about what he heard made him imagine them."

"Oh! At once?"

"I mean that he was frightened on the evening of the raid, and he has brooded over it ever since."

"You may be right."

"Do you think he is quite well?"

"Not quite, no. Will he stay on with you here?"

"We are all going back to London."

"Good. Take him to a children's doctor. Pendrell Sale is the man."

"Thank you, but Avice is Tony's mother, not I. She doesn't live with us. She has her own flat."

Reggie stood up. "And her own doctor?"

"I suppose so."

"Tell her a doctor must see the child, please."

"It is unfortunate you have not met Avice yourself. I can't think why she should be out so long, and with Margot."

"But it's been very interestin' and useful," Reggie assured her.

"Good-bye. Tell Meon we'll meet in London soon."

"You must come and dine with us," said Lady Meon.

CHAPTER XI

COMMON POOL

ON his return to Radbury, Reggie called at the hospital and spent an hour there. Underwood and Venn and Rosen were sitting in the hall of the Crown when he entered. "All silent and all damned!" he said to himself. "Splendid," he said to them. "Come along," and took them up into his own room. "What are your results, inspector?" He gave Venn precedence.

"I have only assisted Mr. Underwood." Venn was portentously polite.

"I could have done nothing without you, Mr. Venn." Underwood took his cue under a grin from Rosen, and, honour being thus satisfied, went on: "There is one man on the list of missing whose description fits the corpse—small, short and slight. He wasn't Radbury born. He lived by himself. He worked in the drawing-office of an agricultural machinery firm, he got the job when the war began, a conscientious objector ordered to find work of national importance. It was the firm reported him missing. The house he lodged in wasn't bombed. His landlady says he went out most nights, but she doesn't know where he went."

"If you consider that, Mr. Fortune," Venn gave instructions, "you will find it is the same story as we had of Carrie Marsh from her grandfather."

"My dear chap! So it is. Thanks very much. Carrie and conscientious objector both night birds and secretive. Well, well."

"We picked up some more about him," Underwood went on, "which makes it practically certain he is the corpse. He was a miserable little whipper-snapper—that's from the landlady. According to his office mates he hadn't room enough in him for any guts."

"Nobody loved him. Sort of fellow some girls fall for."

"And you should notice," Venn announced. "Being in agricultural machinery he had special means of contact with Carrie Marsh, she being a land girl."

"Point well taken. Who was he?"

"Vere Bleaney-Raxon is the name," said Underwood.

"Oh, my aunt! Too bad to be false."

"It must be genuine. Conchies are registered. The firm don't

know anything of his past, but we'll dig that up. I've rung the Yard."

Reggie turned to Venn. "Great work, inspector," and sent him off in complacent dignity.

"There you are, Rosen," Reggie smiled. "Earth hath not anything to show more fair than the English police."

"I'll tell the world. You gave out the burnt corpse had been murdered. Now you make him a gutless mutt necking with this dumb girl. Why would anyone murder him for that?"

"Obvious answer, he cramped someone's style."

"What the hell took him to the rickyard while his girl drowned in the brook?"

"Movements of both uncertain. Time problem unsolved."

"But your guess still is he was murdered?"

"Not a guess, probable inference."

"By the top expert. How do you class conscientious objectors?"

"I don't."

"Some yellow?"

"Oh, yes. Some white."

"Aha. Take it this boy was yellow. He kept out of the war, and settled down in Radbury, where you have key motor-works and camps of the United Nations all round; where the German secret service sent him to raise merry hell between the troops and bring German bombers on the target they wanted; which he conscientiously did. How's that for a probable inference?"

"It could be. If he wasn't murdered. Which is probable."

Rosen grinned. "The expert never goes back on himself, I know."

"Oh, my Rosen! Always going back, as and when evidence leads. Corkscrew path through this case so far, and we've only just begun. Attractive theory, your theory. Assumes the late Vere Bleaney-Raxon, conscientious objector, did his bit to put Germany on top of the world, fanatically obsessed, like Goebbels demands, or for pay. We do get both kinds of animal. Conscientious objection would be new and bafflin' disguise. And we are up against some marvellous camouflage. However. Theory also assumes the conscientious objector was not murdered but burnt himself by accident, though facts point the other way."

"I allow you had something in your inference he was put on the rick to burn. But why don't you join that up with the new facts? The little devil was only an operative."

"Was he?"

"Come down. You know one man couldn't run stunts this size. You're way off the high ups who planned 'em."

"Theory developin'. The operative, when he'd done his job, was murdered by his employers. I wonder."

"Oh, if you want to run your own line by yourself, you can have it."

"My dear chap! Not me. Everything in the common pool. Everybody for everybody else. I run no line. Too many about. See what you make of 'em." Reggie gave a full report of his visit to Hartdean House. . . . At the end, contemplating Rosen with eyes half shut, he asked: "Well?"

"Well, hell," said Rosen. "I hand it to you, you've got a lot and then some. But where the real goods are, you leave me guessing."

"Oh, my Rosen! Not as bad as that. Put facts in order and work on 'em. First set of facts. Meon rushed off takin' his tame soldier Norton so I couldn't question either. Which might be guilty fear or genuine urgent business.. Left his wife to tell the tale he disappeared between the first sight of the rickyard fire and the bombing, and later she found signs someone might have played tricks in his study. More about that later. Provisional inference, Meon is a dark horse, may be suspicious of others, must be suspected himself. Second set of facts. International week-end party, American Falkenstein, Canadian Launay, Toll anything not English, all connected by business with Meon. Fellows like that are up your street, Rosen. What do you know about 'em?"

"Pardon me. I'm no internationalist. Only one of the bunch is my show. But I can give you the dope on Max Falkenstein. He's all right. One hundred per cent American, tops at his job, which is motor-engine production, sent over to link up yours with our little bit."

"Well, well. Continuin' second set of facts. Toll so interested in the rickyard fire he saw a man there Launay couldn't see nor Lady Meon, and took Launay off to save the ricks. They found no man, but stayed on, helped by farm people, till hopeless. Very sportin' for two oldish chaps. Falkenstein did not assist. Though taken by Margot Buckland to look at the fire. Neither couple saw the other. Curious. However. Margot, from things Lady Meon said and didn't say, may be of those whom father in youth called stunners. She brings us to third set of facts. The females. Wise female, Lady Meon; knows a great deal, sees people and things from far off, don't care much for any of 'em, likes herself; yet she told me she didn't like cats. Well. Margot Buckland, the

stunner: Lady Meon's cousin, Meon's social secretary, not by Lady Meon's good will; disappeared with Falkenstein on first report of fire, came back with him long after raid. Conspicuous absence. Lack of interest by secretary and motor production expert in bombing of Meon's works remarkable. And Lady Meon handed out suspicion of Margot over the study. Deal with that in a minute. Avice Denlan; Meon's niece by marriage, widow, mother of boy Tony who is the image of Meon. Lady Meon deigns to be jealous, cool and frank about it, having no child herself. Don't believe she ever wanted one. Still, jealousy can happen that way. Mrs. Denlan vague throughout her ladyship's story. General impression, careless mother. Third set of facts. Tony; shy child, nervous, far from fit. Haven't the slightest doubt he heard screams; screams of Carrie Marsh bein' drowned. Also, when left alone again, heard tapping in house. Lady Meon's agreement with mother he imagined the screams, and Lady Meon's agitation over the tapping equally odd."

"Say," Rosen interrupted. "What's your idea of this tapping that you go big on it?"

"Several points. Mother and Lady Meon in house at time of tapping. Falkenstein and Margot may have been anywhere, Toll and Launay probably out together. Lady Meon badly wanted to know what I thought it was. Same like you. Have you never noticed tapping come from a typewriter?"

"Who's your typist?"

"I wonder."

"Margot, the secretary?"

"She could be."

"Why should anyone get busy with a typewriter that late on the raid night?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"But you aim to get something on Max Falkenstein?"

"Oh, my Rosen! No aim. Only follow the gleam."

"Look at here. You said that kid wasn't fit. A sick kid fancies things."

"Didn't say he was sick. He isn't. Below par. Quite clear in the head, and a good head, too. You notice you're followin' Lady Meon again—she wanted Tony's evidence written off as fancies."

"And you fall between two stools. You want to believe him, as you say he isn't real sick, but you know he is, you told Lady Meon he must be gone over by a doctor."

"No contradiction. There isn't much wrong with him yet. There might be, now he's given us the tapping."

"What, you believe someone will try to wipe the kid out for that?"

"Might try—for fear he gives us more—people in this case don't stick at a trifle. I served notice on Lady Meon and mother to put him under a children's doctor, so all concerned would realise they daren't try. Useful if they did try; probably we should break the case wide open then. But we can't chance a child's life."

"Who is your number one suspect? You seem laying for the women now."

"No preference. Never found female of the species more dreadful than the male, nor less. Fourth and final set of facts. The study. According to Lady Meon, Margot butted in there more than normal; always would do the blackout, quite likely she left the window open. Which goes against Margot or not, as you please; she may have been careless, she may have been playin' tricks. Easy for anyone to get in by the window, window might be left open to suggest someone did. Contents of study all in order, nothing taken. Meon, her ladyship reports, quite sure of that. Which is elimination by him of dirty work from outside or in: also admission he suspected there might have been! somebody after something important. No doubt his papers. His desire to wash out dirty work curious. And on one curtain I found what I didn't show to Lady Meon—this." He gave Rosen a slip of glass to which was stuck the single hair.

Rosen looked at it, and looked at him with wary distrust and said: "You tell me."

"Hair on curtain about as high as my shoulder."

"I get you. Public enemy number one brushed his hair with the curtain. We check up who lost this hair and we have him."

"Ever seen hair this colour?"

"I wouldn't know from a single hair. And the way it is the colour don't look like anything, blueish grey or greyish blue, or what have you."

"Near enough."

"Sure. The criminal's grey hair went blue with cold from the open window."

"Yes. Ridiculous to suggest hair is human. Your suggestion not mine. Try again."

Rosen laughed. "I make it a hair out of the furniture or carpet."

"That's better. But colours all wrong. Never seen smoke-blue Persians?"

"I'm not wise to Persian carpets."

"Didn't mean carpets. Meant cats. Hair isn't human. Hair from a cat. Thought it was from the first. Spent some time with the hospital microscopes verifyin'. Big scales and pigment grains and medulla. No probable possible shadow of doubt. Hair of smoke-blue Persian cat. Most impressive fact. May be crucial fact of the whole case. No cats at Hartdean House. Lady Meon doesn't like 'em. Yet some person recently went into the study and moved the curtains, and in doing so left on one, from his or her shoulder, hair of Persian cat."

"All right. Where do you go from there?"

"Infer the person was one of the week-end party playing tricks. Wanted something in the study, opened window and left it open to suggest entry from outside if Meon made a fuss. Find person who keeps Persian cat, and we'll have who's who and what's what at Hartdean."

"That won't get us any place. The Hartdean crowd are a side issue, if they're an issue at all. Do you ride off on it back to London?"

"No, no, twice or three times. Not side issue. Never shirk a case. Not going back yet. You might put a thing or two in the common pool."

"You'll have all my results good and quick. But I shan't work your Hartdean side. I'll be seeing you." Rosen swung out.

And for the first time Underwood spoke. "You put his back up over that American, Falkenstein."

"Yes, I fear so, yes," Reggie sighed.

"It struck me Rosen was very quick to take offence. I've seen that before when a man didn't feel sure of his ground. Though he gave Falkenstein a first-class character I shouldn't wonder if he has reason to suspect the fellow himself."

"You may be right," Reggie murmured. "Felt want, more information about all the Hartdean week-enders. Miss Margot Buckland and Mrs. Denlan said to have gone off to Radbury together this morning. Might find out if they did, and what they did here or elsewhere."

Having thus set Underwood to work, Reggie called up Lomas with a like amiable purpose. His request for enquiries into the past and present of Meon, Falkenstein, Launay and Toll was not well received. Lomas, in the cooler official style, gave him as severe a snub as Rosen, told him they knew all about Meon, he could take it Meon's guests were equally respectable.

"Brothers under your skins," Reggie sighed.

"Meon and I?"

"Too likely. Wasn't thinking of Meon. Thinking of Mr. Waldo Rosen, one hundred per cent American and the Honourable Sidney Lomas, two hundred per cent English. But both the same official at heart. Sure people accepted by the right people are all right. Warn simple mind it mustn't dare suggest otherwise. Same useful contribution to the common pool. Keep working." Reggie rang off.

Languid and wistful from a long and very hot bath, he was sitting by the fire in the lounge when Underwood returned and drew up a chair beside him and said: "I have something, but I don't know what. It's quite hard the two ladies came to Radbury together about eleven. Both visited the hospital then they parted, leaving the car there, and separately they called on some of the raid victims. Nothing could be more correct, as far as I make out, up to then. But afterwards, well, my name is mud. Here have I been tracing 'em round the town, and I get back and find Miss Buckland had lunch in the hotel here with Major Norton."

"Well, well. Miss Buckland only, not Mrs. Denlan?"

"Just so. What became of Mrs. Denlan I can't say. And I've drawn blank on what Miss Buckland was up to after lunch. They lunched early, half-past twelve or so. Then Norton hurried off alone."

"Oh, yes. To Hartdean, reachin' it in time to go away with Meon on urgent business as I arrived."

"That fits all right. The trouble is the two ladies fade out till they were seen driving off in the car from the hospital close on dusk. There's four hours unaccounted for."

"Another contribution to the common pool. Interestin' and helpful contribution."

Underwood's rueful earnest face became eager and questioning. "How does it help?"

"Strengthens inferences from facts we had. Suggests others quite different. As on night of raid, Margot Buckland unaccounted for over longish time. Which confirms suspicion she's not running straight. Though she runs with Norton as well as Falkenstein. Wonder if that will soothe Rosen. Also with Mrs. Denlan. Which Lady Meon gave me no reason to suspect. On the contrary. Implied the two were as different as women can be—whether with intent to deceive or her mistake. Well. Possibilities are thus much expanded. Margot Buckland uses both Norton and Falkenstein, or they use her, and Mrs. Denlan helps the good work. Further to which the ladies had various and dubious objects in coming here to-day, so secret they needed cover from deeds of

charity and mercy. By and large general conclusion is now justified—the Hartdean week-end party played devil's own game, but have widened the whole case. Isn't that nice for Rosen?"

Underwood was uncomfortable. "Rosen didn't like the way things were breaking, but he's a good chap."

"One of the best. Lucky to have him in this case."

"I don't understand what you mean about the whole case being widened by the Hartdean people."

"They were not operative in raising trouble among the troops and fire to guide raid on Meon's works. But they got together in Meon's house at critical time, and behaved queer, and queer things occurred, indicatin' they were directive, and took action to develop further operations."

"I can't see my way," Underwood protested.

"Nor can I. Nobody could. Greet the unseen with a cheer. Let's have dinner. Rosen will turn up some time."

While they ate and Reggie talked of comic songs and bishops and the ideal car and ferns and cricket Rosen was called away from the table of an American headquarters mess.

Two intelligence officers went with him in a car which drove across mist-bound levels to clearer broken country and stopped on the curve of a sharp rise, where undimmed headlights blazed from a lorry at another car upside down in the ditch and military policemen. One of them was telling a stubborn local constable to shut his head. The constable spied officers and appealed: "Sir, this here light, it ain't right, it shows up to German planes, your men have got to obey regulations, just like anyone else. Kindly give orders it must be dimmed proper at once. It's as bad as the rickyard fire the night of the Radbury raid."

"Cut that out," the answer was fierce. "Don't ask for trouble. We control here. Go patrol your beat."

"I'll have to report it, sir."

"Report yourself for interference."

"Hold on," said Rosen. "What brought you out here, constable?"

"Why, the blazing light."

"Aha. Did you see anyone around?"

"Not till I got here."

"Have you ever had a car crash on this hill before?"

"No, sir, the hill ain't dangerous, but some of you American gentlemen drive that wild."

Rosen walked up the road inspecting the surface, which was smooth tarmac with a dull sheen. Above the start of the curve, the

headlights gave him no help, but he went on some way, then strode back and examined the car.

Both back tyres were flat, the near one split by a ragged hole. . . . "Switch off, Al," he said. "Give the British constabulary a spot of appeasement. It's no dam' good shifting her to-night. Let one of your boys stand by. The rest may as well go back to camp."

The orders were given, the lights went out, the military police, save one, drove off in their van, the village constable pushed his bicycle up the hill. "So that's his way home," said Rosen. "Wait a bit, Al." They waited till the tramp of the constable's feet was out of hearing, then followed him, but stopped at the start of the curve to listen again before flashing a torch on the near side. "Good pickers," Rosen said, as the torch brought out of the darkness a deep ditch and behind that a copse. He swept the edges of ditch and copse with its light yard by yard, steadied the beam on blotches in wet grass and freshly broken earth and searched. . . .

"Yep, that's the place, Al," he said wiping muddy hands on the grass. "We've got it. And my guess is we won't get a darned thing out of it. . . ."

After ten Reggie and Underwood had the lounge of the Crown to themselves. Sitting on the small of his back, eyes shut, but smoking a pipe, Reggie suddenly distracted Underwood's attention from family correspondence by three sad words: "I think so."

Underwood stared at him, and saw Rosen behind him.

"Come across Miss Buckland?" Reggie murmured, eyes still shut. "Or Mrs. Denlan?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Hence the question. Both ladies went places unknown this afternoon."

"They were not with me." Rosen sat down and lit a cigarette and inhaled. "Mine was a stag party. I went to dine at area headquarters. Half-way through Al Jeffs—he's colonel intelligence and has some—fetched me out on a story from Basdon Camp. Six of the boys there were driving into Raster. The car crashed, two passed out, the others were so broken up they don't know what happened. A military cop, motor-bike patrol, found 'em. He made it a burst tyre and a hell of a skid. But the way the troops are, our intelligence pass nothing."

"Sound principle," Reggie murmured. "Only sound principle."

"I'm with you. Basdon Camp is back of beyond in a jumble of ups and downs fifteen miles from Raster, and about that from any place bar villages and Chilcote Camp, which is all Canadian. The Basdon road carries no motor traffic but military after dark these

days. Our cop saw no one and nothing till he found the car. Now then. The car was coming down a gradient of one in five to a blind bend. From that there are skid marks, and twenty yards below the car upside down in the left ditch. Those boys were good sober kids, but I bet they drove like hell for a gay night. Gay, by jake! Raster is a city of the living dead. But the Basdon boys haven't any other place to go, and they use it quite a lot. Well, both back tyres were flat and the left one was burst. Did you ever handle a tyre that had been shot to stop the car?"

"Oh, no. No," said Reggie. "Cars never shot in England. Humane country."

"Live and learn. What burst the left tyre was a charge of buck-shot fired close, and some pellets punctured the other. The gunman knew his stuff. He took cover in the left ditch with an easy getaway behind him, at the start of the blind bend, giving himself a point-blank shot where the car was bound to go out of control and crash with tyres hit."

"Nice work," said Underwood. "Then he must have known the car would come along there."

"You said it. Still and all, I don't go big on that. Some of the Basdon boys drive into Raster most nights, and any guy for twenty miles round would be wise to the habit."

"So you think the fellow had no special reason for shooting at this particular car, his game was to crash any American car that came along?"

"Sure. He had no means of knowing who would be in this car. The boys only made up their party at the last moment."

"I don't see his motive."

"You surprise me. We were up against a blitz of trouble among the troops, and here's American boys get theirs from some guy gunning for them. That'll detonate all round and round. The hell of a motive, brother." Rosen turned on Reggie. "What do you say?"

Reggie's eyes were only half open. "Oh, yes. Yes," he murmured. "Any evidence who gunman was?"

"All I have I've handed you." Rosen studied his wistful vague expression. "It won't give the individual, but it gives the type. Some guy running a hate against Americans and experienced in gun work."

"Sound inference. Practically certain inference," Reggie sighed. "Those two tough guys of yours who broke out of detention camp are the type, what? Gangster type, with reason to make private war against American army and trouble all round."

"I was waiting for you to say so," Rosen answered. "I allow you have a right."

"My dear chap! Never thought of anything like this," Reggie consoled him.

"It don't smell British. As I work things out, the guy used a shot pistol or a sawn-off shot gun, which are common enough in gangster crime our side, but you don't have 'em."

"Not met one up-to-date," Reggie sighed.

"I say, Rosen," Underwood broke in. "What makes you think an American gangster kind of gun was used?"

Rosen's sombre eyes gleamed. "Get this. The shot came from a gun, twelve bore at least, fired so close to the car wheel on the edge of the ditch the barrel must have been short. That gives you a shot pistol or sawn-off shot gun. The guy had to have a gun he could carry inside his vest or down his pants so he didn't show up going to the place or coming away."

"I get it all right. You'll be surprised to hear quite a lot of poachers in this country use guns no longer than walking sticks, guns that take to pieces and go in their pockets and so on."

"Geel!" Rosen laughed. "Common pool is good. I put in plenty to show an American did the job, and you prove it shows the opposite or nothing."

"You put in the special gun," said Underwood. "And we wouldn't have got that without you."

"Valuable, yes," Reggie murmured. "More we are together, happier we shall be."

"I'm fond of taffy," Rosen grinned. "What's left of my stuff now is anyone hereabouts, American, British, Canuck, had an equal chance to do the job the way it was done. Isn't life interesting?"

"Yes. You never know. Yes," said Reggie, and stood up bit by bit.

CHAPTER XII

TOLL IS HELPFUL

UNDERWOOD read a letter at breakfast and showed it to Reggie. It told the odd eventful history of Vere Bleaney-Raxon, conscientious objector. His father, Colonel Raxon, and his mother, born Vera Bleaney, both dead, were both of army families. He, being their only child, refused to go into the army, so they and all

his other relations broke with him, but he had enough money of his own to commence architecture: which he did, well before the war. When conscription came in he obtained exemption easily, made a good show at the tribunal, willing to do anything in his own line that would be useful, bar war work. There was no trick about his getting a job at Radbury, but pure chance. The agricultural machinery firm were short of draughtsmen and he was sent there.

"It sounds all right," said Underwood with regret. "Though it's queer a conscientious objector should come of hereditary soldier people."

"Sad," said Reggie, "but dim. Want someone who knew the lad. Dare say no one did."

"I expect he lived in a little clique of his own kind."

"Yes. Might try to dig up his associates. Forlorn hope. Any shady ones will lie very low now. But try everything."

Reggie spent the morning over large-scale maps of Raddonshire, up-to-date, secret and confidential, and the Radbury train and bus time-table.

Basdon Camp was in the uplands on the west, well away from everywhere, as Rosen said, not even a bus route near. But the American detention camp, from which the two toughs escaped, was at Hastone, within four miles, though Rosen omitted to say so. Well. Not likely the two would haunt that neighbourhood—unless some of their own people were covering them.

Return to the other, the original line about them: some American warrior lost a button in the burnt rickyard. Twenty miles from Basdon and Hastone. but no other American camp nearer. The woods on the Hartdean hills were the best region in the country for escaped prisoners. Blind cover everywhere, yet close to high road for lorry jumping, lots of food about, game, lonely farms and cottages and a big town handy. Also the one region they could raise a fire to guide German bombers on that big town target. Assume they did, they would then break away quick—but not back towards Basdon.

Or would they? The rickyard fire did more than guide the bombers. It turned the original row between Americans and Canadians and British troops and civilians, started by the two rascals, into a blaze of trouble. And now more high explosive on the flames from a shot at the American officers' car. Rosen himself thought his two tough guys put that over. Nice work by Underwood making out a poacher did the job, bless him. Weapon might have been a poacher's gun and the gunman native, though

not a poacher on his normal unlawful occasions. If the two American toughs were operative throughout they must have worked with others of various nationality. Close German contact necessary to time the raid. Local assistance required for the main objective—international flare-up among the troops. Two fellows who daren't appear couldn't put it across in the camps Americans were being done in by English and Canadians and vice versa. Collaborators of good standing must have taken on that job.

Which Rosen hadn't noticed. Or didn't want to notice. Curious. Dumb on the Hartdean side. Determined that should be a wash-out. Why? Fierce against any suspicion of Falkenstein—and uncomfortable. Patriotic plus. Well. He was. He followed up with refusal to take the slightest interest in the other Hartdean people. Never great on subtleties. Still, nothing subtle about the fact the vanishing ladies vanished in Radbury. No reason to go all patriotic over Margot Buckland and Avice Denlan, first English, second Canadian. Except that Margot vanished from Hartdean with the blameless Falkenstein when the fire was first noticed on the night of the raid. But before she vanished in Radbury she was lunching tête-à-tête with the little Major Norton. So what?

Two ladies vanishing separate for hours. After Margot had the latest on everything from Norton, Meon's shy military liaison man. Ladies might have had urgent private affairs in Radbury. Telling the tale they wanted told or Meon wanted. Time enough to go places from there.

Where? Obvious places, Raster, county town, used by Americans at Basdon, inside twenty miles. Chilcote, market town near big Canadian camp, less than fifteen, about eight from Basdon. But neither lady left Radbury by her car.

Reggie consulted the time-table. Good train service to Raster. Fair to Chilcote. Either lady might have visited either, possibilities equal, no probability. But they vanished for some purpose. One obvious purpose—to put it across the Americans they had trouble coming from the Canadians or the English. Raster the place for that. Sorrowfully he decided he had better go there.

Half an hour by car through dreary country. Then a tangle of smug streets round an awful cathedral, prim mediæval aspiration at its dullest. The town was prosperous, with no visible means of support or reason for existence. Natives—"dim ghosts that hover to and fro wrapping their bodies round them like shrouds wherein their souls were buried long ago"—as Rosen said. Fair number of troops. Americans mostly, some Canadians, looking for some-

thing to look at, earnest and hopeful, but not mixing, a few English loafing happily. American military police rather prominent. The only sign of reaction from the car crash—if they were.

Reggie went to lunch at the only possible hotel. It preserved nineteenth-century methods, and was feeding officers of the United Nations in a hurry with slow-motion service. The old waiters preferred civilians, to whom they gave the tables in the alcoves designed for eating as privately as possible. He overheard military grouching at things in general, and nothing in particular. He could not even see the other civilians till one passed his corner going out, a stalwart fellow of very dark complexion and hair brushed up on end all over the head, platinum blonde. How did the fellow get that way?

Reggie finished his lunch and wandered into the office and looked at the register and found the name of Gustav Toll—residence, Ligonier Court, London, S.W.1., nationality, Swedish.

Who'd have thought it, any of it? Meon's friend Toll who left Hartdean the morning after the raid came to stay at Raster on Monday and still there—a neutral in the allied week-end party—a neutral mixed up with the case. Reggie made for a secluded angle of the lounge and lit a pipe and thought things over.

"Pardon," the pale shock of hair, the brown face were at his side. "Permit me. Mr. Fortune, is it not? My name is Toll. We are friends of the Meons, both of us, let us know each other, if you please."

"Delighted," said Reggie, and made room for him, wondering who told him Mr. Fortune had heard Lady Meon tell the tale.

"A cup of coffee?"

"English hotel coffee? I'd rather not."

"You are right. A glass of port, then, the English hotel understands that, does it not?"

"So they say. But I don't."

Toll laughed. "Nor I, no more than you. But I will answer for the brandy." He snapped his fingers at a waiter, who nodded and went out. Toll proceeded to explain himself circuitously. One must admit, the old country towns of England, there was nothing like them in the world. They had a repose, a content, self-sufficing to a marvel. For his part he found in them refreshment. Others, he knew well, not at all. There was an old comrade, now serving with the American army, Toll came to Raster to see whenever he could spare time, that man said the place inspired the blackest humours.

Glasses of brandy were set before them. "This, one can drink it," said Toll, and lapsed into a connoisseur's silence.

Reggie meditated upon him. Working hard, answering unasked questions, making his atmosphere. French accent of sorts. Frenchified phrasing. Why should a Swede put that on? Old comrade in the American army. Meaning they'd soldiered together under another flag. Under a hotter sun, by Toll's complexion. He looked the old soldier every way, hard-bitten, fierce, up to all the tricks in the world, well covered with officer and gentleman veneer. Where had he soldiered, and what for? Not Sweden.

Toll answered this last question also without being asked. To speak truth, the little wars put fleas in the ear. Kronberg and he, they had fought for the Moors in Morocco against the Spaniards, and then for the free Spaniards in Spain against the Moors coming with the Fascists and the Nazis to enslave them. Ah, bah, one knew well how the strings were pulled. A sure stroke, that did not succeed by chance, the Radbury affair.

"Oh, I say," said Reggie, exhibiting amazement. "Is your American army friend suspicious?"

"He had no doubt, nor I no more than he. And now," Toll shrugged. "He is at Basdon."

"I wonder why Lady Meon didn't tell me you had suspicions of somebody. Who was it?"

"Lady Meon did not tell you because I did not confide in her." Toll looked round. "Are you staying here, Mr. Fortune?"

"No, only drove over for lunch. Goin' back to Radbury now."

"And I. I must be in London to-night. But you have a car. If I go with you at once I catch the afternoon express from Radbury. That will do very well."

"Splendid," said Reggie.

One thing Toll implied seemed true. He had made arrangements for leaving Raster. His suitcase was in the hall, his bill ready.

"Now we can talk," he announced as they drove away. "There are no enemy ears listening."

"Were there at the hotel?"

"It is very possible. You heard the American, the Canadian, the English officers. If you had been in the German service you would find that hotel most useful. *Flûte!* I need not tell Mr. Fortune that. Pardon. For my part I made the acquaintance of Meon through neutral business interests in Sweden and Portugal

and Turkey. I am all that there is of the most neutral officially. What would you have? I fought on your side before you did. With my heart I fight still. The good Meon, he is, without doubt, an industrialist of the first order, he knows how to get things done. Whether he sees beyond his nose I cannot tell. Then the others at Hartdean—Falkenstein, I know nothing of him myself, but American officers complain that he chose 'the wise boys' paradise,' they mean avoiding the fighting line—Launay is an aristocrat of commerce, Canadian, of French descent, a very old French family, I have heard—Norton a clever, nervous, little fellow risen from the ranks—as for the ladies, I am no judge of the sex, but I have met women I would trust farther than Miss Buckland and Mrs. Denlan."

"Suspicion general and comprehensive," Reggie murmured.

"What gave me to think was that they showed almost no interest in the affair. The child's alarm passed for nothing, the fire for an accident, an entertaining spectacle. Remark this, my friend, they all went to look at the fire, except perhaps Mrs. Denlan; I, who speak to you, I was the only one who pointed out there was a man by the burning ricks, and thought one should assist. It is true Launay agreed, and accompanied me. But the others! Launay and I were setting out when that little Norton telephoned at last for the fire-brigade. A happy thought! God knows if it was his own or the good Meon's, but it made certain the firemen should be out of Radbury at the time the bombers arrived and set the town ablaze. And Falkenstein—he disappeared with that fascinating Miss Buckland so successfully the raid did not trouble them in the least. They were occupied with each other till long after it was over, and on their reappearance were much surprised to hear it had done great damage."

"Yes. Queer story. However. Crucial point, was there a man by the burnin' ricks?"

"When Launay and I reached them we could not find one. But you may trust my eyes that I saw a man, they have saved my life often enough. Also, there is other evidence. A man was found dead there."

"Evidence man died in the rickyard that night decisive, as you say. Not decisive dead man is the man you saw. But happy to trust your eyes. Could you identify him?"

"At that distance? In the glare and shadow? No. Be serious, my friend."

"You and Launay went to the rickyard. How near were you when you stopped seeing him?"

"What do I know? The rickyard passes out of sight as one goes down from the house."

"Too bad! While visible, did he look tall or short, big or small?"

"He was of more than middle height, I think."

"Oh. And active round the rickyard?"

"As it appeared."

"Well, well. How could he get on to a burning rick and be burnt unconscious before you and Launay arrived?"

"Yes, you are right. Since you have found a man dead you must ask yourself that question. I do not know the answer. But also you found a woman dead not far away. It is possible the man I saw and the woman were assisted to die by some others."

"What others? What for?"

"For what was the rickyard set on fire? To guide the German bombing. But it leaps to the eyes one man did not arrange that alone. There were some others. They would make short work of a man, a woman who obstructed the affair."

"You haven't told me who your others are." Reggie was plaintive.

Toll smiled. "In effect I said I only am innocent, or rather I and my friend Launay, so that we give one another the alibi, is it not? All the rest of the Hartdean party, even the good Meon and little Norton, the brilliant Falkenstein and the charming Miss Buckland, yes, Mrs. Denlan, too, though you will hesitate over Lady Meon, she is exquisite, one must admit all give one to think, and had opportunities. Pray excuse me, I cannot choose among them. But let us consider, now, the Basdon affair."

"The which? Something worryin' your old friend at Basdon?"

"He was unable to lunch with me to-day because American officers posted there were killed and injured last night. Without doubt you have been informed of that."

"Oh, yes. Yes. The car crash. Bad luck."

"Certainly, their car crashed, but not by accident, no more than by accident the man was burnt and the woman was drowned."

"Oh! Are the Americans takin' it that way?"

"There is no other way to take it, sir. The car tyres were shot."

"My only aunt! Not nice. Far from nice. Still and all, why connect the deaths at Hartdean with shootin' up a car load of American officers?"

"May I assume you have heard there is trouble between the American and Canadian troops and your own people over the Radbury affair?"

"Is there? Why is there?"

"Come then, the Canadians and the English are enraged, believing some Americans started the Hartdean fire for the Luftwaffe, and the Americans are furious at the charge. I, I believe to make such a quarrel was one great object in the affair. See how I am confirmed by this assassination of American officers."

"But I don't see. No sort of proof Americans raised the fire. Not likely our troops would shoot up a bunch of American officers by way of revenge. Who told you that one? Your friend in the American army?"

"No, sir. What he told me, it is this. The Americans at Basdon—how do you say?—have lost their hair, all accuse the Canadian troops of the shooting. A grand stroke for Germany!"

"Very ingenious," Reggie murmured. "You're suggestin' German agents in the Radbury affair and this Basdon crash. Meanin' some of those others at Hartdean, what? But which?"

"I do not know, and I do not say more than I know. All the same I am on your side, and even more against the Boche. I give you everything of which I am sure. Listen then, will this help? Yesterday afternoon about three o'clock the fascinating Miss Buckland came into the lounge of the hostel at Raster with two American officers. I was there, but I took care that she did not see me. It was she who talked most, but at the end she was very well-informed of the habits of the young officers at Basdon Camp, how some amused themselves in Raster every evening and the way they drove, and the time. I confess then I thought only mademoiselle is fond of men, especially of Americans. Now, one sees well, she obtained information most useful for the shooting last night. Does that help?"

"I wonder," Reggie murmured.

Toll looked at his watch and said: "Ah, the express is due in five minutes. Are we far from the station?"

"Oh, no. No. Almost there."

Toll rearranged his coat and scarf till they turned into the station yard. "Thank you very much." He jumped out. "I hope we shall meet again in London. *Au revoir*, my friend."

"Hope so," said Reggie, and drove off.

In the hall of the Crown he consulted the railway time-table. The London express was only just due then. Curious and interestin'. Toll saved up his stuff about Margot Buckland pumping American officers at Raster till the end of the journey, and then got the time wrong so no questions could be asked. Helpful fellow, Toll.

CHAPTER XIII

PIECES OVER

REGGIE had tea in his bedroom, and stretched himself out before the fire and meditated upon Toll with reluctance to believe a word the fellow said. One note dominant through all his affectations and tricks—spite against the Hartdean people. By and large he added nothing to Lady Meon's story of their doings on the night of the fire and the raid, but more and worse spite with special hate for Falkenstein and Margot. Her ladyship implied, he stabbed. Quite clever though. He handed out as his own the conclusion Reginald Fortune had reached with more facts than he knew—people hand and glove with Germany in Meon's crowd. Just the way to persuade the innocent Reginald Mr. Gustav Toll was in the clear himself and all out to down the Hun. Yes, caught where he shouldn't be, at once on top of the situation. But his grand slam, his Margot story, must have some truth in it. If the wench hadn't gone to the Raster pub on Monday afternoon, idiotic to say she did, and Toll wasn't any kind of fool. The statement asked for checking, he meant it to be checked.

So what? She disappeared from lunching with Norton, and pumped Americans in Raster a few hours before American officers were shot up on the Basdon—Raster road. Toll's inference she gave the gunman place and time for his act obvious and reasonable. Considering her previous vanishing act in the company of Falkenstein at the time of the fire and the raid, Margot went up equal first with Falkenstein among the suspects, Norton next. And Falkenstein had a bad name in the American army—according to Toll. Check on that also asked for.

Yes. But there was a check ready made on another bit of Toll's hand out. He said the American troops at Basdon were seeing red over their officers' crash. The Americans in Raster showed no sign of that: didn't mix with the Canadians or English, not looking for trouble though, only fed up. Who wouldn't be—in Raster? Toll overplayed his hand. Wanted to make the simple expert's flesh creep. Old game of clever devils and fellows in a blue funk. Was he both? How much did he know? Baffling problems. . . . "More things told than are true and more things true than are told. . . ."

A tap at the door, the entry of Rosen and Underwood cut short

wistful speculation. "Wondered what you fellows were up to," Reggie reproached them.

"Wonder is the great white chief's strong suit," said Rosen. "We've been picking up bits and pieces for the common pool."

"Me, too. With a lot of help. Bafflin' to my simple mind. Want professional advice. Gather round." Reggie gave them an elaborate account of all Toll said, and the way he said it. . . .

Rosen laughed. "He sure gave you everything and everybody; except who pulled out the cat's whiskers. You ought to have put that up to him, Fortune. But maybe you found the hair of the identical cat on his clothes."

"No such luck," Reggie sighed.

"You think he's the guilty cat keeper?"

"Might keep cats."

"I'll say he might. He was very feline with you. Cat and mouse."

"Yes. He had that notion, same like you. Simple nature, my nature. How much of Gustav Toll does the professional mind believe?"

"Quite a lot. His past will have been what he gave out—fighting and gun-running for any side that paid him, till the other side paid more. I guess he's on sale now. And he has something to sell. What he handed you was ground bait for a buyer. You can eat most of it all right."

"The Falkenstein bit?" Reggie murmured.

"No. There is fool talk in the army Max Falkenstein was too clever to fight, and how come a kid like him, with a Hun name, got picked for the wise boys' paradise and hush hush munition jobs. I reckon we won't catch Toll lying—not yet, anyway. But he mixed up that bunk with his Margot Buckland stuff so it should go big with you. I hand it to him he's clever. The way he worked the others in, frank as hell, he was getting himself out"—Rosen chuckled. "Well, I hope I meet him before we're through."

"He was too much for me," Reggie sighed.

Underwood struck in. "I don't see anything wonderful about him. A smart crook caught on the wrong foot often gives information against his pals and others. That's one of the oldest tricks of the trade. He seems to have played it well. But we needn't fall for it, nor for him."

"My Underwood!" Reggie sat up. "Sound professional advice. Take the help the Toll provides us though Tolls are not what they seem."

"Sure," said Rosen with a wink at Underwood. "How much

new did Toll provide us? He has a buddy stationed at Basdon so he could keep tabs on the boys there from way back before the raid to the murders last night. This . . ."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Those two guys of yours—two who broke out of detention camp—were they at Basdon previously?"

"Yes, sir," Rosen snapped at the interruption. "This Kronberg, by Toll's account, is his own fight for the highest bidder kind. Underwood was sure right, you caught Toll on the wrong foot finding him at Raster. His first explanation he went there to see Kronberg is true, I have no doubt. Look how it made things worse for him—he had contact with Kronberg round the time the Basdon boys' crash was planned and Kronberg could put him wise where and when to get 'em. Toll badly needed another explanation of the murders. I'll say he rang the bell with his second one. All we had on Miss Buckland was her disappearance on Monday afternoon and the hell of a hope of any more. Excuse. You're tops at seeing through dead ends. I wouldn't know how you got a hunch she went to Raster."

"No hunch. Wasn't thinkin' of her in particular. Raster obvious possible centre of operations. Always try everything."

"You sure do, and then some. Well, you went and you caught Toll, and he handed you Miss Buckland on a plate."

"Yes. Finally. Yes. With a sudden rapture like a man inspired."

Rosen laughed. "He would feel that way. Her going to Raster and getting the Basdon dope from our boys lets him right out."

"You think so?"

"I don't want to. But we've lost him for now. You can bet the earth his story the girl was there fooling our boys will stand up. She played the same game on Falkenstein. I allow with all this we're way short of evidence for action. We're just left with nothing on Toll and suspecting her like hell."

"Action? I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Haven't you fellows any evidence?"

"That brings out the real difficulty," said Underwood. "The evidence I have don't join up with yours, Mr. Fortune. Together they give us a good deal more than we want."

"My ghost!" Reggie moaned. "Too much from the start. More and still more, day after day."

Rosen laughed. "Isn't life interesting?"

"No." Reggie was cross. "Sweat and tears. What's the new contribution?"

"Mrs. Denlan," said Underwood. "I've traced her disappearance yesterday. She took the twelve-fifteen train to Chilcote. The ticket inspector at the station here remembers her just catching it and coming back. She had lunch in Chilcote with a Canadian officer. The people at the pub—there is only one good pub—know her by sight, she's been there before, in the company of Canadians. So now we have Mrs. Denlan pulling Canadian strings while Miss Buckland and Toll were working on Americans just before zero hour for the murders: we have good reason to suspect any one of 'em had an assignment to get the necessary information and plan the afters. But with equal reason for suspicion of each we can't pick one, nor rope in all three. The fact is, we've dug out such a heap of evidence we don't know what's what."

"Chaos and black night. Yes. Our job. However. Human mind not wholly impotent if used."

"When you turn mystic I cut out," said Rosen. "The way I see the case we're doing a jig-saw puzzle with too many pieces. I'll say some have been forced on us by the Hun gang, but we went hunting after more, and got plenty. The game is now to discard."

"I wonder," said Reggie.

"You're not with me?" Rosen was annoyed.

"Jig-saw puzzle may be larger size than present estimate. Might discard pieces required. Want exact shape and colour of those we have."

"The last point's well taken. Believe me, I'll get the real shape of Toll and Kronberg before I discard 'em." Rosen marched out.

"Good man," said Reggie.

"First-class," said Underwood.

"Didn't mention Falkenstein," said Reggie.

"He wouldn't," said Underwood. "Anything against Falkenstein gets him on the raw."

"Yes. Pity. Yes," said Reggie.

CHAPTER XIV

CLOSING TIME

It is against Reggie's principles to wait dinner for any man. They dined without Rosen. "He'll be confarrin' with the American intelligence people on Toll & Co., bless him," Reggie told Under-

wood as they settled down in the lounge. Rosen had not come back when Underwood was called to the telephone at half-past ten. Some time later Reggie discovered that Underwood also had left the hotel and not come back, a discovery inducing reproachful yawns: "Past my bed time," and determination not to sit up.

The town of Chilcote, small streets branching from two broad roads which cross at right angles through a big market square, was well blacked out, and all quiet until, on the approach of closing time, the public-houses began to send their customers away. That operation, resented and prolonged, made much noisy turmoil. The small streets disgorged upon the market square knots of troops growing angrier as their numbers grew and clashed. From taunts and abuse and jostling, they came to blows. Chilcote's few constables were submerged in a furious mob, Canadian military police threatening and fighting, attacked from every side, beaten down.

Not only fist and foot but knives were at work, and revolvers before Canadian jeeps roared into Chilcote and the mob broke away and scattered. . . .

Reggie coming at his usual hour to breakfast found Underwood half-way through. "Had a good night?" he asked paternally.

"Not much." Underwood gulped coffee.

"Seen Rosen?"

"Yes, this morning, he has a fine large hangover."

"You also?"

"I can carry it." Underwood drank again. "That call for me last night was from Venn, he rushed me out to Chilcote. 'They've had the devil of a business there.'"

"Oh! Chilcote. Mrs. Denlan's Canadian lunch. Tell me all."

Underwood told him.

There was a big Canadian camp near Chilcote, and naturally some of the troops came into the town for drinks every night, quite good boys, gave no trouble to speak of. Round about the usual number were there last night, plenty of pubs for them all, but a lot of Americans were there too. In small parties American troops stationed at Basdon, eight miles away, had made the trip often, and mixed well with the Canucks. This was the first crowd, and it crowded the pubs out. Any old hand could have seen rows would blow up at closing time between fellows left thirsty and fellows in liquor. Some rows of that sort happened, then fellows lined up for one big row, Americans against Canadians, each mob fighting mad.

The Canadian command sent jeeps and armoured cars along quick, cleared the streets, and made some of their own people prisoners and doughboys too, fair enough. No one was killed, a couple of dozen or more seriously injured, kicked on the head, knifed and shot, but all expected to live. So it might have been worse. Still, last night wasn't the end of it by a long chalk, it might very well turn out the worst yet. Canadians said the Americans called them this and that, accused them of the American officers' smash and went for 'em. Americans said the Canadians cursed them for yellow dogs who shot up their own officers, putting the blame on white men. Those were the stories, not from toughs, but decent fellows: each side seemed to believe its own.

"Both probably did," said Reggie, "and do and will."

"I know," said Underwood. "That's what bothers me."

"Yes. Sinful force, power of belief. You . . ."

Behind him Rosen barked an order for porridge.

"Feelin' up to that?" Reggie asked sympathetically, as Rosen sat down, yellowish and heavy-eyed.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Stout fellow. How much of which story are you discardin'?"

Rosen ate his porridge. "I have no fault to find with Underwood's story."

"He hasn't one. Only two. American and Canadian."

"He heard both sides. So did I."

"And accept both? Same like him and me."

"You accept?" Rosen scowled. "You don't have to be funny, Fortune."

"My dear chap! Not tryin'. Accept both sides believed what they said."

"What is this? Letting me down easy? Cut it out. I know you can't believe our boys' tale—bunches of 'em, just happened to blow over from Basdon and happened on the Canucks in Chilcote. Like hell they happened. They planned to raid the Canuck town. I'm not blaming them. The way things have gone, no wonder they were mad, and I bet the Canucks ragged 'em sore. But there'll be reaction all round, which I should have prevented if I'd done my job."

"You play the game," said Underwood. "And nobody could have played better than you."

"Not a doubt," said Reggie. "You're too modest, Rosen. Which obscures the real question: why were the Basdon Americans mad with the Canucks? Mad about officers being murdered, yes, only human, but there isn't the slightest reason to suspect Cana-

dians of the murders. On the contrary. Canadian camp eight miles away. Canadians hadn't any known grudge against American officers. The evidence so far found suggests gangster or poacher crime. Nothing Canadian about that. Yet the Basdon Americans got into their heads the murders were Canadian. Curious and surprisin'."

"Is it?" Rosen's heavy eyes examined him. "I'm long past surprise at anything boys think up when mad."

"Try again. Remember the two stories. Canucks said Americans accused them of the smash. Your explanation, Americans were mad. Yes. But Americans said Canadians accused them of shootin' up their own officers. Mad, same like Americans. Yes. Got into their heads similar suspicion reversed. Surprisin' and curious—to my simple young mind."

A gleam of amusement broke through Rosen's grim, intent gaze. "Childlike is the word for you. I'm plumb senile to take no account of this cursing the other side. You find what you want in any old stuff, whether it's there or not. Show me."

"Wanted more than I found. Still want. However. Always take all there is. Real question, why Americans were mad with Canadians doubled by other question, why Canadians were mad with Americans. Probable answer, practically certain answer, some person or persons told the Americans the Canadians ran a poisonous hate against them, and told the Canadians the Americans would put everything on them. Take in other facts. Toll was at Raster. Margot Buckland also, disappearing from tête-à-tête with Norton, worked on Americans there. Mrs. Denlan came out of her vanishin' act in Chilcote, and there did her bit with Canadians. Ladies then went back to Hartdean, Toll to London. Within a few hours American officers were murdered. Twenty-four hours later Americans marched on Chilcote and clashed with Canadians, both sides seein' red, fightin' mad. Second question. Who told the tale? Obvious answer, Mrs. Denlan could have told the Canadians, either Toll or Margot Buckland the Americans. Both Margot and Toll are suspect with, roughly, equal reason. Bad show by Margot on the night of the raid and throughout. Toll far from good. Too anxious explaining himself on the raid and after, and too keen giving her away. Can't choose between 'em. Strong probability they did not work together, but both may have taken a hand. Possible others unknown assisted. At the Canadian end—Mrs. Denlan. No previous definite suspicion of her. Behaviour on night of raid correct, accordin' to the evidence. Odd things happened round

her. Lady Meon don't like her. I didn't like her child's condition. Not the best mother in the world, if you believe Lady Meon, but Meon makes much of her. On the whole, and without prejudice, vague female, Mrs. Denlan. Sudden association with Margot Buckland for enquiries among Radbury raid victims followed by separate journeys to Raster and Chilcote, American end and Canadian end, startlin' break from the vague. Active, purposeful female usin' Canadians."

"You have something," said Rosen slowly. "How do you fit Mrs. Denlan into Miss Buckland?"

"Could be workin' together. Playin' same game at the two ends. Takin' their orders from same German source. Could be workin' against each other—common with secret service people, what?—could be independent, could even be innocent."

"Sure. One guess is as good as another. So what?"

"Don't guess," said Reggie. "Keep an open mind till you have more evidence."

"The more we have the more we're fooled. All we get comes out of what the German set up hands us, from bad to worse."

"Wouldn't say that. Dealing with nasty brutes, brute in charge full of hate and fiendish clever. But we've discovered his main objective, to destroy American and British and Dominion trust in one another, we've put a ring round the brutes who operate for him."

"Oh, we're great! We can't pull in one of them. We don't even know who they are. Unless there's quick action by us they'll have us beat to the world."

"Never did like waitin' myself," Reggie sighed. "Never let it cramp my style though."

CHAPTER XV

MISSING MAN TURNED UP

HE spent half an hour on telephone conversation with the Criminal Investigation Department, irritating Lomas by a cool, discursive report of events, reproachful enquiry whether the higher intelligence knew anything about anybody yet—Falkenstein, Toll Launay, the ladies, the Meons, Norton.

"You've omitted someone," Lomas retorted.

"Who?"

"Old Uncle Tom Cobbley."

"Poor joke, and not even your own. Wake up. Past and present of all these suspects urgently needed. Go to it."

"I can't spare men for fishing enquiries at large. There's a war on."

"The perfect official. His defence in every muck he makes. With a war on he can't think. Men must fight and women must weep, and the more they curse him the sounder he'll sleep."

"Damme . . ."

"As you say." Reggie rang off and rang up his wife. He did not cut that conversation short.

He came back to his hotel cheerful and dreamy, a state of mind not disturbed by the sight of Venn with Underwood in the hall.

"I have been waiting for you, sir," said Venn. "My car is just round the corner."

"My dear chap," Reggie purred. "Take me anywhere you like. Where do you like?"

"I would rather not explain till we are on the way," Venn rebuked him, and drove out of Radbury in portentous silence.

"Now then, old man," said Underwood.

"Under present conditions," Venn explained, "we must be careful. Enemy ears are listening, as the French used to say. I have just received information of an American soldier being found dead about five miles from Basdon. The body was discovered early this morning by a woodman going to work, so he said, but the police sergeant nearest the place reports he was more likely going round his rabbit and game traps; he is a known poacher, though he has not been caught in the act."

Reggie looked sideways at Underwood and murmured: "Well, well. Poacher."

"However that may be," Venn went on, "he took the village constable to a copse and pointed out the body beside a footpath. As it happened this constable was the man who came on Mr. Rosen and the American party dealing with that American car crash without informing the police."

"Oh! Body near spot car crashed?"

"More than a mile away, on the Raster side by footpath, further by road. But the constable sent word to his sergeant at once and proper arrangements were made. The body has not been moved, nothing has been disturbed in the vicinity, nor will be till our arrival."

"Splendid. Told Rosen?"

"Not personally. I left that to Mr. Underwood in the circumstances, seeing no objection myself."

"Rosen was at corps headquarters," said Underwood. "He'll come along."

"What I hope, Mr. Fortune," Venn instructed him severely, "what I hope we may have from you this time is definite evidence of the cause and manner of death. On this occasion we are able to give you a clear field."

"Where there's death there's hope," Reggie murmured.

The car went up and down sharp short hills, cultivated on the lower slopes, dark on the heights with forest trees and thickets. In a tunnel of brown-leaved oaks an ambulance van had drawn to the roadside. Venn passed it, and stopped where one plank across the right hand ditch made provision for a footpath through the wood. A policeman chatting with the ambulance driver sprang to attention and saluted.

"I'll stand by for Rosen," said Underwood.

Venn gave him a careless nod and turned. "Now, Mr. Fortune.—I'll go first, I must show you the way."

"Please." Reggie was meek.

The path slanted from the road at an acute angle, and with greasy but hard surface through a belt of big trees, then, reaching scrub, birch and clumps of thorn and gorse, made the angle with the road bigger, and became soft, sodden sand.

"Oh, my Venn! Too fast," Reggie complained, making no effort to keep up. "Is this path much used?"

"Not in general. If you notice, the footprints and the bicycle tracks are fresh. They were made by my men this morning."

"Yes. They would be. Yes. Push-bike tracks. Did one of your men come on a motor-bike?"

"No, sir, not to my knowledge."

Reggie beckoned and pointed. "Look at that. Motor-bike tyres."

"The marks are old."

"As you say. Obscured by this morning's energy."

"They were made a long time ago. The sand has sunk over indentations that haven't been touched."

"Point well taken."

"Any time some fellow may have ridden his motor-bike along the path from Raster."

"Oh!" Reggie looked round. "Raster's down there. Motor-bike was goin' towards Raster, not from it."

"Very well, it's all the same."

Reggie gazed at him plaintively. "My dear chap! Contrariwise. Raises question, where did he come from? Not many people in these parts. Few of them would have motor-bikes. Why would one go to Raster by this nasty path instead of the decent road? Bafflin' but helpful question."

"Excuse me, I don't find that it helps at all. If I may say so, Mr. Fortune, the sooner you deal with the body the better."

"Losé on swings make up on roundabouts," Reggie murmured, but did not walk any faster.

Thus Underwood and Rosen were enabled to join him as he passed between thickets of broom and sloe and crab apple, and saw Venn standing by a hazel copse, policemen round him.

"How's it go?" Rosen asked.

"Might be worse," Reggie sighed. "Might have been further."

"Sure. Might have been any place. Why was it here?"

"One of the questions. Quite a lot more. But no answer from me. Your contribution much needed."

"Venn's boys don't exhibit a motor-bike."

"Thought you'd spot the tracks."

"Underwood was the spotter, but he didn't go big on it."

"Same like Venn."

That stung Underwood. "I've never found old tracks any use yet, Mr. Fortune," he retorted.

"My dear chap. Oh, my dear chap! These were old; which is just what makes 'em useful."

"Expert witness style," Rosen laughed, and took Underwood's arm. "You should worry. It all comes out in the wash. But look, let him have a free hand with old man Venn."

They fell behind Reggie as he went through the cluster of policemen to the copse. A grass-grown bank rose between it and the path. Venn stood over an American uniform dank and filthy stretched out across path and bank. "A soldier, you will see, Mr. Fortune," he expounded. "A private of an infantry regiment. And you may take it for certain . . ."

"Take nothing for certain." Reggie swung round. Walked on scanning the path, came back and contemplated the dead man from head to feet. His feet were in the grass of the bank, he lay half turned, his head in the sandy path, damp filth darkening red hair, face smeared with dirt over beard stubble of some days' growth.

Reggie knelt down and lifted the head . . . parted the back hair . . . opened the mouth . . .

He rose slowly, glanced at Rosen, murmured: "You try," and drew back.

Venn took that amiss. "Can you form an opinion of your own, Mr. Fortune?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Primary cause of death, depressed fracture base of skull, from blow by blunt weapon, such as gun butt. Secondary cause, asphyxia while unconscious, from cloggin' of mouth and nostrils by dirt. Time of death uncertain. At least twelve hours ago. Probably much more. Place of death not here. Died with face in leaf mould: whole head and body also. No doubt put into heap of decayed leaves such as any wood provides, and when well and truly dead brought here. Probably on motor-bike. Tracks deeper than normal."

Venn was silent for a period of obvious wrestling thought which led him to announce: "I am much obliged, Mr. Fortune. You are quite clear on the main point, it is a case of murder. As to the rest, I must tell you I cannot accept theories which there are no means of verifying."

"Oh, my Venn! Think again. Who rode the motor-bike? Where is he? Where is it? There's the means, use 'em. If you make good with 'em, you'll solve the whole case."

"I may say," Venn exploded, "I have no need of instructions how to do my job, sir."

Reggie looked over his shoulder to ask: "Finished, Rosen?"

"Aha!"

"Venn's first point—to identify corpse. Missin' man turned up, what?"

The jaw of Venn fell. Rosen gave no sign of surprise or any other emotion as he answered: "You said it. The deceased is one of the two men who escaped from Hastone detention camp a while back, Jeremiah Nolan, of New York, aged twenty-one. Lorry driver in civilian life, no next of kin."

"There you are, Venn. And that bein' that, back to Radbury for us."

"Quick and fast," said Rosen.

"Wait a minute," Venn protested. "I shall require evidence from the American army at the inquest, Mr. Rosen. May I . . ."

"You'll sure get it." Rosen strode off, shortened step for Reggie and Underwood to join him, and asked them: "How do you breed fellows like that? By mules out of morons?"

"Oh, no. No. By superior persons out of specialism. Don't you have officials in America? Well-meanin' man, Venn. As they go."

"Venn's all right, Rosen," said Underwood. "Safety first, but not dumb and no tricks."

"What was the idea then, turning down everything about the motor-bike? At the best he's running a line of his own he means to keep from us."

"I don't think so," said Underwood. "Mr. Fortune's style bothered him. He is not the only one, eh, Rosen? He couldn't make sense of the motor-bike suggestions. They were dream talk and dreamland to him."

"My Underwood!" Reggie was hurt. "And to you?"

"Well, sir," Underwood chuckled. "You didn't give him anything very hard."

"His darned condescension got my goat," said Rosen. "You may have him, Underwood. I allow there's nothing hard beyond the cause of death and the identity. But Fortune went big." He grinned at Reggie. "Say, you're a swell guesser to guess he was one of those two guys before I identified him."

"Didn't guess," Reggie was plaintive. "Had your description of both. Which proved him Jeremiah Nolan. Hence several new facts, perfectly hard. No button torn from Nolan's uniform. Teeth of Jeremiah Nolan all natural and complete. Though we found American button and denture among ashes of rickyard fire. Well. One missin' man turned up thus. Other still missin'. Wonder where Alfred Roget is—with what buttons and what teeth."

Rosen scowled. "I told you the fellows in their section believe neither used a denture."

"You did, yes. All the same, someone shed a denture over the fire. Not the conscientious objector burnt in it. Not Jeremiah Nolan killed elsewhere. Group Captain called the false teeth we found 'dead man's effects.' Doin' better than he knew. Those false teeth belonged to neither of the known dead, but probably effects of action taken by one."

"What's the use of going all cryptic? Your talk boils down to this—Alfred Roget raised the fire, had a scrap over it with the conscientious objector or Nolan or both, had his false teeth knocked out, killed the conchy right there and Nolan later, some place else."

"You are boiling it down," Reggie smiled.

"Oh, I know you mixed things so I should have to. I'm not swallowing the result."

"Nor am I. Things not yet in the pot wanted."

"We're together. I allow it's a fair guess—no, you never guess—it is one possible inference—that guy Roget did the whole business. But we want a lot more to prove he did."

"Oh, yes. Yes. Other possibilities. Some people may prefer the possibility Jeremiah Nolan was done in by Canadians, what?"

"It'll be first preference on the American side," said Rosen grimly. "Look how things back it. Do they indicate his murder was connected with the murders of American officers near by or do they?"

"My dear chap!" Reggie smiled. "Definite indication."

Rosen gave him a dubious glance. "Add that on to the belief these officers were murdered by Canadians which made the American-Canadian row at Chilcote and you get a total worse than ever."

"By addin' wrong. One possibility, Nolan killed by Canadians in course of killin' officers. Second possibility, Nolan killed by Canadians in revenge for Chilcote row. But both are not possible. Add first to second, total is nought. Also, more possibilities. Nolan killed by poacher—as Underwood said—by English troops—by his dear friend, Alfred Roget. Each a reasonable possibility, and none of 'em can be added to any other."

"Sure," said Rosen, "We're in a dead end once more. Now tell us what you see through the blank wall."

"My Rosen! Nasty sarcastic. I don't see. End is dead. Wall is blank."

"Come on, let's have it, which is your pick of the possibilities?"

"Of facts this side the blank wall, one most impressive to my unprofessional mind—missin' man turned up." Reggie gazed with wide, plaintive eyes at Rosen's angry scowl and repeated: "He turned up. Havin' been buried alive. He turned up where someone was sure to find him, and not far from scene of officers' murders. Why should he turn up after burial? Only one answer. Man who killed and buried him thought it good business people should believe his murder was done over crashin' the American officers' car. Object, further inflammation of the American-Canadian quarrel. Second fact, less impressive, but remarkable. Nolan's friend, Alfred Roget, still missin'."

"Talk straight," Rosen exclaimed. "You work round and round with hints against Roget. How much do you go on 'em? Is it your bet Roget did the whole dam' business?"

"Oh, no. No bet from me. Roget couldn't have done everything—by himself. And we are certain some other people took a hand. However. When Roget first caught the eye he was in criminal partnership with Nolan. Suppose both went to raise the fire, conchy, goin' over to meet the girl Carrie, saw them at it, and interfered, and they wiped him out; then, makin' for their hidin'

place in the Hartdean woods, they met Carrie and obliterated her too. Next operation of German plan, American officers. Suppose Nolan drew the line at that—plenty of toughs have some point of honour—and they quarrelled. Roget couldn't let him break away. Exit Nolan, knocked on the head in the woods, while still alive buried under leaves, because Roget saw uses for him after death, and havin' dealt with the officers accordin' to plan, conveyed the body per motor-bike to place where it would give definite indication Nolan killed by Canucks who killed the officers. Resourceful fellow, Roget. Promptly, brutally and safely eliminates partner who finds the business too foul, so elimination will help the major objective, everybody against everybody else."

"I hand it you," said Rosen. "I never heard a better story, nor one so full of elegant fancies."

"The leg is not pulled." Reggie gave him a small, benign smile. "Neat story. Construction makes all known facts fit together in accordance with real geography and time. Nice story. Could even be true. Far from certain. I did know that, Rosen. Put forward as provisional hypothesis, no more. You fellows might verify—same like Venn wanted."

"I have no use for old man Venn," said Rosen. "But his grouse was you hadn't given him a story worth verifying. Why didn't you put him on to Roget?"

"Wouldn't prejudice the Venn mind. If it went all out after an American, not so good, what?"

"You're more than right," Rosen agreed.

"This case is an egg dance," said Underwood. "Venn will do his bit, though. I shouldn't be surprised if he traces the motor-bike."

"He has my leave," Rosen grinned. "If he ever finds it, Roget won't be with it."

"Not likely, no," said Reggie. "Things bein' thus, operations here probably concluded. Time the higher intelligence sat up and took notice. I'm goin' home."

"What? You mean to say you're through?" Rosen protested. "You drop out of the case?"

"Never drop cases. Want further and better particulars of this one. Somebody must know something about Roget's past."

"If anybody does I'll get it." Rosen's formidable chin stuck out.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. DENLAN IS AT HOME

SOMEONE called up Meon's house in Kensington, asked for Mrs. Denlan, was told she did not live there, and given an address in Chelsea.

Grandcourt House. Concrete dump of flats. Blot on pleasant old-fashioned neighbourhood. All modern discomfort.

Having taken that view of it Reggie went in. A slow lift conveyed him to the third floor. The old woman who answered his ring at Mrs. Denlan's bell, pure Cockney of the distrustful type, sniffed over his card, told him she'd see, but she thought meddum 'ad gone aht, and left him on the mat.

But not for long. She bustled back with an: "If yer please, sir"; she showed him into a bright room.

Nothing modern about Mrs. Denlan's idea of a drawing-room. Rather pre-last war. Comfortable. Gay, clean colours. One or two good eighteenth century French pieces. Enlarged photograph of young man. Good deal like Meon, allowing for difference in age. Mighty like Meon's dead son, as per photo in his study. And so like Tony. There was Tony on the bureau—three Tonies, from twelve months to four years old. Enlarged young man on the wall might be father. Meon on the piano, Lady Meon also. Very fond of family portraits, Mrs. Denlan; but fondness limited to the Meon strain. Odd.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Fortune," a soft voice came round the opening door. "Mrs. Chubb is a treasure, but she cannot bear to let anyone in."

"Good fault," said Reggie, as he took the little hand held out, approved slight figure, pretty, pale face, big, brown, bright eyes. "Charitable of you to be at home to the unknown."

"I wish I had been at Hartdean when you came. Lady Meon told me about you, I can't thank you enough for taking such an interest in Tony. Hartdean never suits him, though the Meons naturally want him there, and this time, of course, he was frightened. But I have often felt afraid he isn't strong. As soon as we were back we went to the specialist you recommended, Dr. Pendrell Sale. What a clever man he is! I wish, I wish I had known of him before. He took the greatest pains, and Tony didn't mind; he says there's nothing really wrong, but to take

great care, and he will see Tony again soon. I can trust him, can't I?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Sale's careful."

"I have been dreadfully anxious sometimes. Now I feel safe, and I owe it to you, Mr. Fortune," the big eyes were glistening. "Thank you ever so." She sprang up. "I must get tea, the treasure isn't presentable. Please stay. Tony will be in soon, and he would like to see you."

How different from Lady Meon. Frank, naïve, forthcoming. And yet didn't say a lot. Lady Meon said plenty, and meant to, though she never spoke out. Different on the surface, yes. Underneath? Not in love with each other.

Reggie wandered round the room. Everything just so. Nothing personal about anything. Which was Mrs. Denlan's own style. No trace of cats. Tony said they hadn't had one for some time. Nothing that could be a souvenir—except the big photograph—nothing else from Mrs. Denlan's earlier days, married or single. Curious.

Rustle outside. Reggie sat down to let her see him contemplating the enlarged young man as she brought the tea-tray in; he stood up and helped with table and chairs, sat down again and praised the room and the delights of Chelsea.

She didn't know London. She wanted to make a real home for Tony in America, they really belonged there. But Uncle Tom kept on insisting they must come to England and live with him, it seemed best. Aunt Florence soon found the flat for them, and that did give Tony a home of his own. He was not actually Uncle Tom's son—Mrs. Denlan smiled—though people might think so.

"Marked resemblance, yes," said Reggie.

"He is the image of his father." Mrs. Denlan looked sadly at the big photograph. "Jim was Uncle Tom's nephew, you know."

"I hadn't been told. Strikin' family likeness, from generation to generation, Meon, your husband, your son Tony."

"Yes, there is not much of me to be seen in Tony," said Mrs. Denlan. "I am glad. I hope he will grow up just like Jim. Sometimes I feel afraid he is too slight, not so strong, and that is my share in him. But it is the strangest thing how the Meon type goes on. Jim's mother was Uncle Tom's sister, his only sister and just like him. While Jim's father had a narrow, long face, as different as could be—and Jim took after his mother absolutely, just as Tony takes after Jim, bless them—Jim's father and I, Tony's mother, just do not count."

"Incalculable," Reggie murmured. "Was Tony's father an only child also?"

"Oh, no. Jim had an elder sister," said Mrs. Denlan. "She was the Meon type, too. I should say she is, at least I hope I should. She was a missionary in China when the Japanese invaded, and Jim could get no news of her after that."

"Too bad," Reggie sympathised. "Hard on you and her people."

"It worried Jim. It frightens me more now. There is only Tony left, you see, no one but Tony of them all." Mrs. Denlan's big eyes looked at the three Tonies and she poured forth family history.

Forty years of it: from Meon running a little garage and his sister Sophy teaching school. John Denlan, engineer, married her and took her to America. They settled down in Detroit, the two children were born there, Julia, the missionary, in 1909, Jim in 1914. They were comfortably off while John Denlan lived, but he died in 1933. Jim was at McGill then, studying to be a chemical engineer. Julia had gone to China, Jim finished his course, his mother wanted him to, she found enough money for that, and she died soon after. That was 1935. Meon wrote at once offering help, offering him a job in England. But Jim wouldn't have it. He was set against any factory job, he'd made up his mind to play round. He went off to western Canada, wandered about for years, settled down to prospecting in Alberta and from that became a bush pilot—flying men and supplies out over the wilds. Mrs. Denlan—Avice Lisle, she was then—met him in 1938 when they were both on holiday at Banff. The strangest chance, she had made the trip with some girls from Winnipeg, and Jim and she did not know each other existed before, and in three months they were married. They lived at Edmonton hardly a year. Tony was only just born in June, '39, when Jim crashed, his plane hit a mountain, and the air-line people could not find out why.

Mrs. Denlan stopped talking, and closed her eyes. After a moment: "The real why—I shall never understand," she said. "There is only Tony left."

She went on with the history. When Meon heard about Jim he wrote they must come to him. It was impossible, of course, while Tony was a tiny baby. She stayed at Edmonton as long as she could bear it without Jim, and then at Winnipeg. Meon kept writing, practically ordered her to bring Tony home—he called it home—he had lost his own son a little before Jim in the same sort of way, he wanted Tony. She didn't like coming, but she felt she

ought, he was able to do much more for Tony than she. So in the summer of 1941 they came over and he . . .

She broke off. "I think that was Tony, Mr. Fortune." She went to the door, opened it, listened and called: "Isabel!" A squawk replied. A girl in her early teens, much made up, nails blood red, brought Tony and went out, ogling Reggie over her shoulder. Tony stood still. "You remember Mr. Fortune, darling," Mrs. Denlan told him.

Tony flushed, moved towards Reggie, and held out his hand and said: "How do you do?"

"Hallo!" Reggie jumped up, shook hands, drew him to a couch and sat close beside him. "Wanted to see you again. Been painting?"

Tony shook his head sadly. "I've been for a walk with Isabel."

"Dr. Pendrell Sale said he must be in the fresh air as much as possible," Mrs. Denlan explained.

"Oh, yes. Yes. Where did you go, Tony?"

"Along the 'bankment."

"By the river. Lots of things to paint there."

"What things?" Tony asked. "I don't know any."

"Boats and barges and tugs . . ." Reggie made conversation about them with much colour till Tony was half-convinced they were worth painting, and a little cheerier . . .

"It was kind of you, Mr. Fortune," Mrs. Denlan sped the parting guest. "I wish he had a proper nurse, but I simply cannot get one as things are. He is quite safe with Isabel, she is my treasure's grand-daughter, but she does not know how to interest him. You have done him so much good. Please come and see us again soon."

There are those who deny that Reggie ever walked anywhere if he could ride. His procedure when he said good-bye to Mrs. Denlan refutes them. He ignored taxis, buses, the Underground, and walked along the Chelsea Embankment.

Tony. Not comfortable with mamma. Not happy. But better than he was at Hartdean. And mamma more than welcomed medical advice about him. To her own financial interest he should live and grow up and get Meon's money. Queer servants. Not so good, the little minx nursemaid. Might be the best Mrs. Denlan could get, as she said. Why not look after Tony herself? Because he was uncomfortable with her, and she knew it. She seemed fond of him, if only for business reasons.

Baffling female. Most of the family history she told must be true. But why tell such a lot? All the Meons there were through

forty years, how they lived and died and every event dated. The dates! Help! Never heard so many in one talk. She had 'em precise on the tip of her tongue. As if she'd got 'em up for an examination. Why hand 'em to Reginald, who wasn't the least inquisitive?

Rather like Toll. Explaining spontaneous when not asked to explain. With a difference. Toll pitched in a story which would clear himself and bring suspicion on Margot Buckland. Nothing like that from Mrs. Denlan. Some flavour of dislike, distrust of Lady Meon, not a hint of a charge against anyone, not one word about the Raddonshire crimes, no sign she was conscious of any need to clear herself, no curiosity whether Reginald knew she'd lunched with Canadians at Chilcote.

Frank, naïve woman who hadn't done a thing wrong and was concentrated on her child getting the Meon money might very well talk to Reginald as she talked.

Uncommon naïve and frank with family history. But while telling such a lot left some out. Gave her maiden name and town she lived in before marriage. And that was all she did give about herself and her own family. From talk, like room, conspicuous absence of anything personal. She lived in Winnipeg, yes. What did she live on, what were her people, where did they live, why hadn't she gone to them when left a widow with a small baby? No reason she should tell Reginald, who didn't ask. But since she told him so much Meon family history, shouldn't have been dumb on her family. Why was she? Meon and Lady Meon photos displayed, uncle and aunt by marriage, no father, no mother, not one relation or friend. Perhaps Meon made her wash out her people and past. Such things did happen. Perhaps she washed 'em out herself on being taken up by the rich uncle, which also could be.

Difficult female. Beautifully neat, person, dress, manners, talk. Yet not self-conscious. Gushing, free and natural. Yes. Highly accomplished. With reservations. Way of speech too careful. Accent more or less ordinary English, but with vague difference. Pronounced every syllable in full and precise English as she isn't spoke.

Reggie passed dreamily through the gates of Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HIGHER INTELLIGENCE

LOMAS was reading and took no notice of him. Reggie sat down in an easy chair by the fire, lit a pipe and blew smoke rings, through which he murmured: "‘Vacant heart and hand and eye, Easy live and quiet die.’ Shockin’ to disturb you. But war still on."

Lomas went on reading. Reggie blew more smoke rings at him. He put his papers into a folder. "I suppose you have come to report on the valuable work you've done in Raddonshire," he said coldly.

"Your error. Came to make the higher intelligence work. If possible."

"The trouble between the Americans and the Canadians which we foresaw . . ."

"Oh, no. No. You didn't foresee that. Haven't foreseen anything. Saw trouble between our people and the Americans after it had occurred. Didn't see it comin'. Nor did I. American-Canadian row broke out over new murders, accordin' to German plan. Of which the higher intelligence might have discovered something this end before action. Has it now?"

"The murders were planned and carried out in Raddonshire."

"Carried out, yes. Planned, no, except the details. Plan made by higher intelligence, same like yours, only more active, now in London."

"That's mere conjecture. There is nothing to support it."

"My poor Lomas. You mean you've found nothing, because you won't look."

"I have certainly not acted on your innumerable suggestions. Meon himself, Norton, Launay, Toll, Falkenstein—is the list complete?"

"No. Forgotten the ladies."

Lomas laughed. "I beg your pardon. No doubt the ladies must be equally dangerous. All these five men are well known, and doing business with departments which vouch for them. I can't go behind that."

"Said he, speakin' officially."

"Talking common sense," Lomas retorted. "Their records satisfy the secret service. It would be worse than futile to start police enquiries."

"Secret service blokes satisfied on the men. Well, well." Reggie's eyelids drooped. "And on the ladies?"

A military uniform strode in. "You've heard of Mr. Fortune, General," said Lomas. "Here he is. General Dermor, Reginald."

General Dermor looked none the better for seeing Reggie. Without the uniform he wouldn't have looked any kind of soldier. Highbrow ecclesiastic.

He unlocked a brief-case, took out some typescript and gave it to Lomas. Lomas read it, and passed it to Reggie. Dermor frowned an unspoken protest. "It's all over the world now," said Lomas.

It was a series of extracts from German newspapers describing flamboyantly murderous battles between Canadian and American troops round their camps at Chilcote, in Raddonsshire.

"Even spelt the names right," said Reggie.

"The Germans are an accurate people," Dermor told him.

"Oh, my dear General!" Reggie sighed. "No date line to these stories. When were they published?"

"The German press published them on the morning after the Chilcote affair. We received them to-day. The Censor will stop publication here."

"Why?"

Dermor stared the contempt of a sage for a fool. "It is obviously necessary to prevent such stories reaching the troops. They would inflame a situation dangerous enough as things are."

"Not necessary to prevent." Reggie sat up. "Even if you could, which you can't. Stories have gone round the world, as Lomas was sayin'. They'll reach the troops. Attempt at prevention no cure, and far from necessary. Contrariwise. Grave error. Cure in your hands. Handed you by the accurate Germans. Publish their stories here, all the lurid lies—with date line—advisin' our sagacious press to point out Germans invented 'em before the row at Chilcote happened. And thus prove the whole affair was made in Germany."

Lomas burst out laughing. "One of your best efforts, Reginald."

Dermor was not amused, but smoothed his austere contempt into tolerance. "I agree the suggestion is ingenious. You must allow me to point out it is impracticable. If we adopted it, we should be relying upon a sanguine wishful estimate of the effects of publication against the plain danger. We cannot do that, Lomas."

Lomas shrugged.

"Secrecy not the best policy," said Reggie. "The worst."

"Experience teaches it is the only sound policy in war time, Mr. Fortune," Dermor told him. "Let me say I accept the basis of your suggestion, that the date at which the German press published the stories shows the Chilcote affair was contrived by German agents. I was about to make that point myself."

"Splendid," said Reggie. "Doin' anything with it?"

Dermor gazed through him. "I employ all the means at my disposal, sir."

"Found the missin' American?"

Dermor was startled. "What American is missing?"

"Alfred Roget, 25, black hair and eyes, dark complexion, five foot six and 170 pounds."

Dermor froze again. "You refer to one of the two men who escaped from the American detention camp."

"Yes. The other, Jeremiah Nolan, havin' been murdered, want Roget."

"I was informed of the circumstances of Nolan's death. It is not a matter for me, but for the police."

"Oh?" Reggie turned from him. "Passed to you, Lomas. Well?"

"There is a later report than yours, Reginald. Underwood phoned this afternoon. That local inspector, Venn, has found a motor-bicycle with tyres which fit the tracks on the path by Nolan's body."

"Good for Venn. He does work and even think. Go on."

"He traced the bicycle. It was stolen from a farm near the detention camp soon after Roget and Nolan escaped. Venn found it lying in a ditch outside Raster, close to a house which someone broke into the night before Nolan's body was discovered, and took a suitcase full of men's clothes." Lomas cocked an eyebrow at Dermor. "The police are doing their share, General. Here is a chain of evidence for you this rascal Roget murdered the man who had been associated with him throughout the other Raddonshire crimes, and then went away from Raster in disguise. It's clear enough Roget was the chief agent of the Germans down there. We shall look for him, of course. But I expect something from your fellows. A German agent planted among American troops is rather in your department than mine. If you have no light on him I dare say Waldo Rosen will help you."

Dermor stood up. "The evidence that Roget murdered his associate may be sufficient. What you tell me yields no evidence that he was a German agent or took part in the other crimes. You may rely on me to use all my resources for the discovery of those

who planned them and profited by them. I do not require help from Mr. Rosen." He marched out.

"Explore every avenue," Reggie sighed. "Leave no stone unturned. Well, well. One more official. How you love each other, my Lomas."

"These secret service wallahs never will co-operate," said Lomas bitterly.

"So different from the police," Reggie sympathised. "Ungrateful beggar. Turned you down cold. And went away in an icy rage. I wonder. It was your advice he should consult Rosen that brought him below zero. Does he bar Rosen as a man or as an American?"

"Dermor objects to anyone knowing anything but himself."

"So I gathered. But to Rosen even more than me. Suggestive. Well, well. In the light of Roget's departure from Raddonshire reconsider my suggestion. Crimes planned by people who came to London. Men on the list departmentally guaranteed, so you won't look at 'em. Not so the ladies. Consider them. I had tea this afternoon with Meon's niece by marriage, Mrs. Denlan, née Avice Lisle, at Winnipeg or somewhere." Reggie gave an account of her and her account of herself. . . .

"You did wonderfully well in the time, Reginald," Lomas smiled. "But I suppose they all tell you the story of their lives at first sight."

"How you wrong me. Point is Mrs. Denlan told me story of other people's lives but not of her own."

"I agree," said Lomas slowly. "As she was so forthcoming, she wouldn't have been so reticent about herself unless she had a past to hide. From your description she's a gold digger, what?"

"In a maternal way, yes. Didn't try to hide she brought the child over so he should get Meon's money."

"And she didn't come out of the top drawer?"

"I think not. Character too much made up, though her face wasn't. Manners, talk and so on, effusive, yet she spoke uncommon precise. The way people talk who once talked different."

"You suspect she's a foreigner?"

"No foreign accent. No accent at all. Her story implied she was Canadian born, but left birthplace and parents indefinite. Origin might be foreign—or not. Might be merely poor. May have taken pains to wash it out for that reason, when she got on in the world. Meon may have told her she must."

"Yes, the wench has a past which she is concealing for some reason," said Lomas. "There are other angles on her, Reginald."

"My dear chap!" Reggie exhibited surprise. "What do you see?"

"Take the sequence. She came into Meon's household and learnt all about him, and then the Raddonshire affair began. She was at Hartdean when his works were bombed. She dodged away to meet Canadians just before the American subalterns were murdered and the Canadian-American riot."

"Not nice sequence, no. Further to which, didn't explain her lunch with Canadians in all the explanations she gave me. Kept that dark, same like her past."

"Exactly. Her whole conduct has been suspicious. You may add, she was the one person in the Hartdean party that week-end whose origin and record are unknown."

"Could bear to know more. Felt want," Reggie murmured. "Who was Mrs. Denlan—née Avise Lisle or not—at Winnipeg or elsewhere—and what was she between birth and birth of Tony and arrival with him to Meon's open arms. I wonder. Could ask Meon." He gazed dreamily at Lomas. "Better not. Meon might cramp your style. Assumin' the wench is a foreigner and a foreign agent."

"Meon doesn't know," said Lomas. "We can leave him out at present. The Canadian police are adequate, highly adequate. They'll get all her past, if it was in Canada, and if it wasn't how she began there. Then we'll take direct action."

CHAPTER XVIII

DINNER PARTY

ONE of the letters which Reggie found waiting for him at home was from Lady Meon.

She reminded him he promised to dine with them in London; they would be so glad if he could bring Mrs. Fortune on Monday at eight: or was that too early?

He hadn't promised. How did she know he'd come back? Not from Mrs. Denlan. Letter dated the day before: also postmark. Heard from someone keeping tabs on him? Or didn't know, but took chance? Very short notice. Very keen to see him again.

"Ever met Lady Meon, Joan?" he enquired.

Mrs. Fortune didn't remember her.

"She's the motor man's wife. Motor man whose Radbury works were bombed. I met the lady down there."

Mrs. Fortune's amber eyes told him she was surprised. Talking cases at home is against his principles.

"Now her ladyship has asked us both to dinner on Monday. Could you make it?"

"Do you want me?"

"I do rather. Best opinion on women there is, your opinion. I found her bafflin'. Not sure about her female relations. Who might be in the party. One possible object of sudden party to put them through their paces with us."

"Why with me?"

"So Lady Meon should show 'em we're friends of hers."

Mrs. Fortune smiled. "She didn't fascinate you."

"Yes, she did in a way. Subtle female. Challengin' female."

"My poor child," said Mrs. Fortune.

So Reggie accepted the invitation.

On Saturday afternoon they were planning a new rose garden for the end of the war when an apologetic maid said Mr. Waldo Rosen had called.

"Bless him!" Reggie moaned. "In the consultin'-room, please."

"I know," Rosen answered his look of pensive enquiry. "I'm all wrong to disturb the sacred British week-end."

"My dear chap! Should have rung you if you hadn't. Well?"

"I take back my curses on old man Venn. He has made good over the motor-bike, with Underwood prodding him. I allow you were right, Roget killed Nolan and was number one operative in the other crimes, and is now well away from Raddonshire. What do your high-ups know about that?"

"Nothing. So far. And you?"

"I've got bits and pieces of his past. He was a bar-keep in New York. He's on the police records there for unproved complicity with racketeers—mobs extorting money from firms by intimidation."

"Heard of 'em. Some raise fires for that purpose, what?"

Rosen laughed. "They do. You have no need I should give you anything. You thought of it first every time. Yes, sir, the more we get on Alfred Roget, the more he seems to fill the bill. Here's an American soldier, suspect before enlistment of racketeering and fire-raising, on the spot where the hell of a fire was raised and Americans were murdered. There is one more thing. I

dare say you've thought of that too. Roget's an alleged American citizen, but New York has him down as some sort of wop."

"I wonder. French name, Roget."

"Sure. But the men of his regiment saw nothing French about him."

"Yet could be of foreign origin. Others are."

Rosen looked blank. "Who's in your mind?"

"Toll, for instance. Toll, and his friend, Kronberg. Checked up on them?"

"Kronberg's well certified."

"Everybody is."

"He fought the Germans in Norway, got a bunch of Norwegians safe out across the Swedish border, then came to the States on propaganda we should join the war. Yes, quite a few Europeans visited us with that object. But we didn't have many of 'em take up citizenship so they could join our army when we looked like fighting. Kronberg jumped to it. Well, he was promoted in quick time, and pushed into operational staff jobs, yet there is no envying at him. Would you want a better line on a man? I can give you one more. I had a wet night with him, and I'll say he's honest to God."

"Splendid. What did he say about Toll?"

"Not a lot. Toll's story they went through the Spanish Civil War together is hard, but Kronberg kind of let out he don't think so much of Toll as he did once, saying Toll was a first-class fighting man, those days. I got the idea he thought Toll ought to be in this war."

"Interestin' and suggestive. Any mention of Falkenstein?"

"It is a fact, though Toll forced it on you, Kronberg hasn't much use for Falkenstein. You know how the fighting soldier loves civilian experts. But I have to own Al Jeffs, the intelligence colonel, who isn't plain soldier, takes a very dim view of Falkenstein, more brains than guts, and, excuse me, too darned British."

"Well, well. Hadn't thought of that one. Falkenstein. Good old English name."

"Oh, forget it! Falkenstein is American by two descents."

"Nothing in a name, as you say. Any substance in Colonel Jeffs' complaint Falkenstein has gone all British?"

"I make that a build-up from Falkenstein being so close to the Meon crowd."

"Close?" said Reggie. "Closer than he should be—as a good American?"

"Not a bit. His job is to know all there is to know about British

tank design and production. He couldn't do it unless he was intimate with Meon."

"Difficult, yes," Reggie murmured. "Anything on the ladies of the Meon crowd from Colonel Jeffs or Kronberg?"

"Toll didn't tell Kronberg his story Miss Buckland had a date with some of our boys at Raster. Kronberg don't know her by name or repute. Al Jeffs says she's a number one lovely, and runs round a lot, but good clean fun." Rosen winked. "It sounds like he's fallen for her. You ought to meet her. I'll be with you."

"What is his opinion of Mrs. Denlan?" Reggie asked severely.

"She's only a name to Jeffs. He may get something from his Canadian opposite number, but relations are strained. The Canadian end is for your folks."

"Called on her this afternoon," said Reggie. "Ever been to Winnipeg?"

"I have passed through it."

"Large town, what?"

"Quarter million large."

"Pity," Reggie sighed, and described his interview with Mrs. Denlan. . . .

"You have something," Rosen grinned. "What do you go on it?"

"Mind is open. Waitin' further and better particulars of lady from Canadian police enquiries at Winnipeg, Banff and elsewhere."

"Aha. The Canuck cops are good, but her pre-marital past lies the hell of a time back from her coming over to Meon with her baby. What about that move? Can you make her bringing him fit your suspicion she planned the kid should die?"

"Not easy. Rather think I was wrong. However. Right to take no risks and show her we're looking after Tony. Her reaction useful and instructive."

Rosen laughed. "Sure. You froze her to a chattering funk. How do you read that?"

"Could be fear child is in danger from someone else."

"Lady Meon?"

"I wonder. No love lost between Lady Meon and Mrs. Denlan. Allurin' and subtle, Lady Meon. Without fear. Which Mrs. Denlan is not. Want to know what she was when Avice Lisle, of Winnipeg—if she was. Good English name, or Canadian or American. Nothing in a name, as you said about Falkenstein. Also her reticence on the Lisle family suggests name might be false, to conceal foreign origin."

"You trend towards making her a German agent," said Rosen. "There's more might be, and could be, than I care for. All you have hard on that line is she went to the Canucks at Chilcote while Miss Buckland went to our boys at Raster the day of the murders, and she did not give you any explanation. It only amounts to another might be. And against all the might be stuff you have the question, why the hell should the Germans place an agent and a woman agent in Meon's house? She'd be no use for the fire and the murders. She'd have done her stuff with the Canadians unnoticed, if she hadn't been staying with Meon."

"Sound objection. Unanswerable objection at present. Many pieces of the puzzle not yet found. May find some on Monday. Lady Meon has asked us to dinner."

"Us?"

"Me and Joan. My dear chap!" Reggie gazed at him with remorse. "Forgive me. You've never met my wife yet. Too bad. Come on."

Rosen dined with them, and stayed late, but no one said a word about Lady Meon's invitation till he, on the doorstep, asked Reggie: "Does Mrs. Fortune know Lady Meon?"

"Not yet. Doubt if anyone does."

"I have no right to say it, but I would refuse that invitation."

"Thanks." Reggie put a hand on his shoulder. "There's the child. I'm careful, Rosen. . . ."

One of the old Kensington houses. Drawing-room modernised about 1880. Lady Meon hadn't done much to it. Wise woman. Pre-Raphaelite setting perfect for her. Made Margot Buckland look flamboyant—and sulky.

Meon not there. But Mr. Frédéric Launay being introduced to Mrs. Fortune, and then Major Norton. Not without humour, that spectacle. Joan, regal, Launay, stately ancestor style, little Norton fidgeting round 'em.

Enter Meon in a hurry. Then Mrs. Denlan. After consultation with him? Well. Six of the week-end party at Hartdean present. And so to dinner. Toll and Falkenstein not invited, or had refused. Curious.

"I think eight is the perfect number, Mr. Fortune," said Lady Meon. "Four women and four men."

Right, of course: but curious she pointed out the difference, and the resemblance between the Hartdean party and that party.

Round table. Lady Meon on his left, Margot on his right, Joan between Meon and Launay. Next to Launay, Mrs. Denlan, Norton on the other side of Margot.

Follow Lady Meon's lead. Make conversation on the best number for a dinner party. Some subtleties from her about people 'too much alike, and people not like enough. Margot broke in. "The absolute best is one woman and two men. Then two women and one man."

"Same thing," said Reggie. "Men much the same as women. Haven't you noticed?"

"Yes, of course, that's why they bore each other when they pair off."

"Cruel to dash my hopes."

"Being cruel is Margot's profession." Lady Meon smiled, and turned to Mrs. Denlan and asked how Tony was.

Gentle voice didn't conceal that smile at Margot, and kind enquiry of Avice Denlan, were both stabs.

Margot stabbed back. "Did you hope you would pair off with Aunt Florence, Mr. Fortune?"

"Always hope for the best in secret."

"Wake up, Don," Margot flashed a laughing glance at Norton. "Mr. Fortune wants you to help him keep his secrets. You know everything about that art."

Norton looked unhappy. "I was born dumb."

Margot went on with the application of her principle that one woman needs two men, trying to make them fight each other. Reggie amused himself with her looks while he encouraged the effort and evaded it. Norton sulked.

For some time Lady Meon let this run. Reggie heard Avice Denlan's studied, precise speech gushing that Tony was ever so much better since they left Hartdean, and the specialist said home was the best place for him, and Mr. Fortune had been so kind . . .

Yes. The eager Avice meant Mr. Fortune to hear all that. Especially her telling Lady Meon off.

Couldn't hear the other half circle. Joan and Launay and Meon. Meon fussily attentive. Bless her! Charming to him, almost put him at his ease. No trouble with Launay. Beautiful, old-fashioned manners, courtly, deferential, but light in hand. He was interesting Joan, amusing her, and yet he didn't cut Meon out.

Lady Meon turned from Avice and spoke to Norton with obvious intent the conversation should become general. Joan and Launay took the cue, Reggie assisted, they talked about everything and nothing in particular. . . .

The ladies departed. Meon praised his port.

Reggie passed it. "Rather keep to claret."

"I am 'of your mind, Mr. Fortune," said Launay, and opened a discussion on wine.

Good talk. Good judge. Over doubtful points, taste French; Courteous, but quite certain the right opinion was the opinion of France. Reggie took the other side and enjoyed himself.

Meon grew restive, stated that port was the Englishman's wine, and had made Englishmen what they are. "Oh yes, yes," Reggie murmured. "How are they doing at Radbury?"

Meon told him that was the devil of a business. God only knew how long it would be before the works were in full production again. "Hard on the men," said Reggie. "What's the state of feeling?"

"What do you expect? They're mad to get their own back."

"From whom?"

"Why, from the Hun, of course. Sorry I missed you at Hartdean. Have you worked out any clue to the German spies?"

"Spies? Me? Oh, no! No!" Reggie gazed at him with plaintive amazement. "Not in my line, Meon, that sort of business." Wide round eyes turned upon Norton. "Secret service job, isn't it, Major?"

"Definitely," said Norton.

"But you were enquiring into the raid and the fire," Meon persisted.

"No, I'm only medical. Police called me in for my opinion on the two deaths the night of the fire, man found burnt in the rickyard, girl drowned in the brook. Had to bother Lady Meon about time and circumstances of fire. Then I was through with the case."

"I suppose you were consulted about the murders since," said Meon.

"Murders? Don't know how the American officers crashed. Wasn't asked to take that up. Gave an opinion on the American soldier. No doubt he'd been murdered." Reggie sat back and exclaimed: "I say! Do you think he hit up against German espionage and sabotage?"

"That's the story going round Raddonshire," Meon answered.

"There are so many stories in war time," said Launay. "But that one is probable enough. France resounded with such stories before the collapse, and we know now that many were true."

"This isn't France," said Norton.

"Ought to put it up to the secret service, though," said Reggie.

"I have," said Meon. "Won't you take some more claret?"

Reggie declined, Launay declined, and Meon announced they might as well join the ladies.

Obviously thought he'd done his stuff. And suggestive stuff. First object, to pump Reginald: which was foreseen. Second object, to tell Reginald all the Raddonshire crimes were German work, and go on record he was demanding a spy hunt, which had not been foreseen. Just the line the ordinary man would take, did take. No one more ordinary than Meon—on the surface. But far from ordinary this advertisement to the medical expert Sir Thomas Meon hated the Hun and the secret service wallahs weren't hot enough for him. Any connection between that and the absence from the dinner party of Falkenstein and Toll?

On the way to the drawing-room Reggie remarked: "Came across a friend of yours down there. Gustav Toll. Interestin' fellow."

"Down in Raddonshire, was he?" said Meon. "I didn't know but I'm not surprised. Toll runs with Americans a good deal."

"He will do them no harm," said Launay. "He loathes the very name of German."

Toll distrusted by Meon, certified by Launay. Odd. And so to the ladies.

Lady Meon with Joan and Avice Denlan. Margot missing. Norton faded away. Probably to find her. Avice rose, intercepted Reggie and Meon and talked about Tony, his past and future, with some mention of her dead husband.

Launay between Joan and Lady Meon. Confound him. A good time being had by all three.

Enter Margot. Not Norton. Joined the Avice trio. Avice didn't mind: on the contrary, quite happy playing second, while Margot flashed and fascinated and dominated. Gorgeous creature to look at. Otherwise dull. Meon half captivated, half afraid of her. . . .

Reggie felt his wife's eye on him, and answered with a grateful look. She rose, he jumped up. General leave-taking.

"Why, where is Major Norton?" Lady Meon asked at large.

"He had a call to make," Meon told her.

As Reggie went downstairs, someone said: "Max Falkenstein." Soft voice. Lady Meon? Avice? Not Margot. Nor Meon. Possibly Launay.

Waiting for his wife in the hall he whistled truculent Wagner music till she came with Avice and Meon and Launay, then asked: "Can we drive you home, Mrs. Denlan?"

"Thank you so much. Sir Thomas is taking me," she smiled.

"I, too, have been rejected, Fortune," said Launay.

Reggie drove through the black streets at a speed which Mrs. Fortune endured in silence. He put the car away. When he came back she sat looking into the bedroom fire. He kissed her hair.

"Was it very bad, Joan?"

"I don't like her."

"Which one?"

"Oh, Lady Meon. She is cold."

"Lovin' not, hatin' not?"

"Perhaps. I think she is too selfish for either. But how can one tell? She despises her people."

"Yes. With reason or otherwise?"

"I didn't care for Mrs. Denlan. She seems . . ." Mrs. Fortune stopped short.

"Underbred?"

"That isn't the word I wanted. Her manners are really better than Lady Meon's."

"My dear girl! The gush."

"Lady Meon's reserve is worse," said Mrs. Fortune. "I think Mrs. Denlan is fond of her child. She has some feeling. But she seems mean."

"Fond of the child for what she can get by him?"

"You are hard."

"Don't want to be. That's why I brought you in. Well, Margot Buckland?"

Mrs. Fortune smiled at him. "You were strong and brave. The only man she couldn't frighten."

"Meon and Norton scared of her, yes. Not Launay."

"Launay avoided her, or she him."

"It did turn out that way. I wonder. Haven't given me your opinion of the splendacious lady."

"She hasn't found herself. I hope she will."

"Well, well. Judgment reserved. Rather spoiling herself now, what?"

"She's not kind," said Mrs. Fortune slowly.

"No. What about the men?"

"They are very different. I don't know how I could have borne Sir Thomas Meon alone. He was nervous and arrogant and condescending. But Launay is an agreeable person, he talks well, he knows things, he has style, he doesn't show off."

"Man and brother?"

"Friendly man of the world," said Mrs. Fortune.

"Well, well. Only person friendly. Only person quite at ease."

Could you tell, while I was goin' down, who said something about Max Falkenstein?"

"I am not sure, I fancy Lady Meon did. Why, who is he?"

"American technician. One of the Hartdean party. And, accordin' to Lady Meon, captured by Margot."

Mrs. Fortune's nice nose scorned the suggestion. "Do you believe that?"

"Mind is open. However. Somebody mentioned Falkenstein so I could hear. Your fancy probably right. Lady Meon did—to jab at Margot and attract my attention."

"Out of cold malice?" Mrs. Fortune asked.

"Cold, yes. Malice? I wonder."

"Was that why you whistled the Walküren Ritt?"

Reggie smiled. "Were there reactions on the stairs?"

"Mrs. Denlan said what a strange, peculiar tune, Meon said it wasn't a tune, and Launay said he was right, it was Wagner."

"Not too bad," Reggie murmured.

Mrs. Fortune made a face at him.

"Simple experiment, Joan. Meon rubbed it into me he hated Germans, and I must start a German spy hunt. Launay certified that Toll was a hearty German hater, and hinted we're overrun by German agents, like the French before they cracked. Both of 'em laid it on thick. And Norton got hot and bothered and vanished. Then somebody shoved Herr Falkenstein, of the U.S.A. at me. So I tried 'em out with a stave of the German overman at his most ferocious. Avice and Meon were annoyed, but gave out they didn't know it. Launay told 'em with a jibe. And now all the Meon crowd are aware my simple mind is not wholly passive under their instruction on the German problem."

"You feel sure some of them have been working for Germany?"

"Not sure, no. Think it probable."

"They were afraid of one another," said Mrs. Fortune. "I thought they had private motives they wanted to hide."

Reggie gazed at her with wistful admiration. "You mean the child. You're right."

"Am I? I don't understand."

"Nor me. But I'll work at it, Joan."

Her amber eyes shone. She touched him and went away.

Reggie lit a pipe, fetched from his consulting-room a volume of the *Dictionnaire Larousse*, and read biographies of two Launays. Bernard René Jourdan de Launay was the governor of the Bastille in 1789, killed when the Parisians stormed it. Louis de Launay was a geologist and mining engineer born 1860. No other Launays

known to Larousse. The telephone rang. "Lomas speaking, Reginald. I want you first thing to-morrow. Nine o'clock, please."

"Why?" Reggie moaned, but the telephone was dumb.

CHAPTER XIX

LETTERS FROM IRELAND

A TRIFLE before nine he strolled into Lomas's room. "Why?" he asked, and drew back from the portentous arrival of General Dermor.

"Morning, General." Lomas was brusque. "I've managed to get Fortune for you, you see."

"I am much obliged." Dermor sat down. "I take it Mr. Fortune knows nothing of the matter."

"Which is this one?" Reggie sighed.

Dermor unlocked a brief-case. "Through channels with which I need not trouble you my department has obtained a letter posted to an address in Southern Ireland. I may add that the address is a newsagent's shop receiving letters to be called for. We shall be glad of your opinion." He gave Reggie an envelope.

"Postmark, London. Date, Monday after the Radbury raid.

" ' T. Casey, Esq.

" ' c/o Bay,

" ' Butt Street,

" ' Cork,

" ' Eire.' "

"Careful, picturesque writing. Letter, quarto sheet, stamped heading, Hartdean House, Radbury, and dated Saturday, without figures. Same picturesque writing.

" ' DEAR T.,

" ' I won't be able to get over this time, old son. But here's all the best.

" ' MAX.' "

Reggie looked up at Dermor and murmured: "Falkenstein, what?"

"Are you familiar with his writing?"

"Never saw any. But Falkenstein was the only Max at Hartdean, as far as I know. Well?"

"The writing has been compared with several specimens of his writing, and my experts have no doubt that he wrote this letter."

"Writin' with marked characteristics. Take your experts' conclusion Falkenstein wrote the letter. Harmless letter in itself. Found more to it than meets the eye?"

"Allow me." Dermor took it from him, and held the blank back of it to the fire. Figures, words, a sketch, spread dark yellow over the paper. "You observe, Mr. Fortune?"

"Oh, yes. Nitre and copper chloride ink. Old one. What is this secret message?"

Dermor gave him the paper back. He studied it till it grew cold, and the yellow lines faded out.

"Too technical for me. Details of armaments?"

"They are essential particulars of a new pattern tank."

"Where could Falkenstein get 'em?"

"Meon had been entrusted with the plans to initiate production at Radbury."

"My ghost!" Reggie murmured. "Shown Meon this letter?"

"No, sir. The time has not come for that. I have confined myself, at present, to warning the department concerned, and they tell me Meon took the plans to Radbury for consideration of some manufacturing problems, and had returned them suggesting improvements. He has given assurances that no one but himself and Major Norton and his production engineer had access to them."

"Well, well. Lady Meon told me he told her nothing in his study was taken on the night of the raid."

Dermor's pontifical austerity broke and emitted ejaculations. "Taken? What do you mean? What part have you played in the affair? What . . ."

"My dear General. Preserve absolute calm. Night of raid, Lady Meon found Meon's study window open. So she said. After Falkenstein, Meon and other males of party, Norton, Toll and Launay, had left the house to look at fire, raid or what not. Window could have been opened from outside: also by one of party to suggest an outsider had got in. Lady Meon made much of the window, implyin' somebody had done dirty work in the study, yet assurin' me Meon's papers hadn't been meddled with, same like he's assuring the department concerned."

"I see." Dermor became the grand inquisitor again. "The

facts you report are of some significance. What do you deduce from them, sir?"

"Mind was open. Possible Meon—or Lady Meon—suspected someone. Lady Meon—and Meon—not above suspicion. Others also. Now—on your new facts—someone did operate in the study, and the someone was Falkenstein—or one of the others workin' for him."

"You seem reluctant to commit yourself." Dermor gave him a bleak smile.

"Oh, no. No. Must pull in Falkenstein and put him through it."

"I do not find fault with your caution, sir. In my own view the Meons' treatment of the study episode shows that Meon has been something less than frank, and that Falkenstein may have had an accomplice in the house."

"Comprehensive view. Sound view," said Reggie. "Any more light on Falkenstein?"

"His ability made a favourable impression here which has not been diminished by his contemptuous attitude to English methods. I might say to the whole Allied effort."

"Oh! As bad as that. Heard some Americans take a dim view of him for different reason. Were you keepin' an eye on him before this letter?" *

"I was not. The department with which he had contact made no communication to me about him until after examining the letter I asked for a report."

"Any previous letters addressed to T. Casey, Esq., care of Bay, been intercepted by your people?"

"Letters to several persons in care of Bay have come before me, proving that Bay's shop was used by German agents, but the name of T. Casey is new."

"Previous letters with valuable message in secret ink like this?"

"Secret inks are often employed. The value of the information sent has varied. When it was worthless I let it go through to deceive the enemy." Dermor's ascetic countenance showed pleasure. "Several persons who sent messages of some value have been traced and dealt with appropriately. I have had no case so important as Falkenstein's."

"Not a nice case," said Reggie. "Where is he, Lomas?"

"In London." Lomas dialled a number and asked:

"Latest, please," and exclaimed: "Damme, the fellow's at Meon's office."

"Well, well. Deeper and deeper yet," Reggie murmured.

"Still, Falkenstein by himself, first." He looked from Lomas to

Dermor. "Free, white and independent American citizen. Want Waldo Rosen, General. Show we're playing fair, what?"

"I have no objection to Mr. Waldo Rosen personally in the circumstances," said Dermor. "But the affair does not admit of delay. Please make arrangements for this afternoon, Lomas, and inform me of the hour." He glided out.

"On the knee, Lomas," Reggie chuckled. "However. Not a bad mind. For an official."

"You're two birds of the same feather," said Lomas. "Both mystery-mongers. This is going to be a devilish nasty business, Reginald."

"Yes. On top of all the rest, shatterin' blow, epistle of Falkenstein. I wonder."

"You've been suspecting him throughout. Have you told Rosen?"

"Told Rosen everything. Only way."

"How did he take it?"

"Fierce for Falkenstein at first. Weakened later."

"Was the letter a surprise to you?"

"No. And yes. Thought something of the sort had been done," said Reggie slowly. "Doubted the secret service would be good enough to trace it. My error. Humble apologies to the Right Reverend General Dermor. Well. Ring Rosen. He will be surprised."

Lomas made a grimace. "And furious."

"Yes. For contradictory reasons. He began with the highest opinion of Falkenstein. Then an American intelligence wallah told him Falkenstein was too darned British. Now we tell him our intelligence has discovered Falkenstein's a German spy. Poor Rosen." Reggie stood up. "Grand inquisition at what time?"

"We'll make it three, if we can."

"Thank you kindly. I do want my lunch."

CHAPTER XX

THE LOW CHAIR

REGGIE lunched at the dulllest of his clubs which still has some old Montrachet. Without speaking to anyone but waiters he came back and found Rosen in front of Lomas's fire, sardonic but calm.

"My dear chap. One dam' thing after another," he murmured.

"And the worst yet some ways," said Rosen.

"Could be, yes."

"You have a right to say you told me Max Falkenstein was dirt."

"Oh, my Rosen! Never told you so."

"You sure did, in your dream-talk style."

"I was vague. As you complained. Put all I knew into the common pool and asked what you knew about Falkenstein—and others."

"You're great at asking. How much do you go on the answer you've got from your secret service work?"

"Not my work. Hadn't asked our secret service about Falkenstein, only you. They stopped the letter in the normal course of business."

"I accept that. I don't have any grouse against you, nor against them so far. I allow you give us a square deal, calling me in before you take action. But it's my turn to play the asking game. Are you satisfied Falkenstein wrote the letter?"

"Never seen a specimen of his writing. But Dermor has, and taken expert opinion. No great faith in hand-writin' experts myself. Still, I should say letter was dashed off, and writin' has marked individual character. Other points. Letter written on Hartdean paper when Falkenstein was there, and so had opportunity of seeing what Meon's study contained, which someone did. Case for prosecution. Strongish case."

"That circumstantial stuff points at the others in Meon's crowd just as much as at Falkenstein," said Rosen. "The case stands or falls by the writing."

"You think so?" Reggie murmured, and Rosen's sombre eyes flashed and searched him. "Well! well!" he went on dreamily. "Suppose you know Falkenstein's hand."

"I have two authentic letters with me. Here you are . . ."

"No, thanks, no. Not in my line." Reggie waved them away, and gazed round the room and sighed: "Same old setting. Low chair for suspect so the higher intelligence can look down on him. Ought to have put a throne for the Grand Inquisitor, Lomas. We're not . . ."

General Dermor arrived. "You know Waldo Rosen, General," Lomas prompted him.

"I am happy to have your assistance, Mr. Rosen."

"The pleasure is mine, sir."

"Rosen's brought some letters of Falkenstein's with him," said Lomas. "We'll compare them before we have Falkenstein in."

"If you wish," Dermor deigned to consent, gave Rosen the envelope addressed to T. Casey and wrapped himself in dignity aloof from Rosen's existence.

Reggie watched with drooping eyelids. Rosen spent some time over the address, much more time over the letter, used a magnifying glass on it, and on the letters he spread out beside it. His grave, sarcastic expression had not changed for an instant when he flung a sharp question: "Did your folks get any finger-prints, General?"

"A number of prints were found on the envelope, but none distinguishable, as is usually the case. There were none on the letter. That also is common. The absence of prints from a letter can seldom be taken as significant. But you will observe a particular reason for their absence from this letter."

"Sure. It's all crisp and crinkled, because it had to be heated after writing to make sure the secret ink read clear, which also diminished the chance a print would remain. The print stuff is apt to let you down every time you want it in our game. May I hot up the secret side once more?"

"Allow me." Dermor took the letter from him and held it to the fire.

Rosen examined yellow figures, words, sketch . . . "Aha." He looked up. "I'm no armament sharp, General. Do I have your assurance this specification gives particulars of a British design entrusted to Meon for manufacture at Radbury?"

"Yes, sir, for experimental production."

"And are you certain the writing of the specification is Falkenstein's?"

"As regards the specification, absolute certainty cannot be reached from the nature of the ink and the unnatural small script necessary to compress so much into a limited space. Nevertheless, on close examination you will find the resemblance is marked."

"Fair and just. On my side I own there isn't a doubt Falkenstein wrote the letter. We've got to go through with it. Have you pulled him in, Lomas?"

"Falkenstein has been waiting some time," Lomas smiled. Rosen grinned. "Sit here, will you?"

Reggie sank deeper in the big, easy chair by the fire while Lomas put Rosen on his left, Dermor on his right, so that they half encircled, backs to the window, the low chair facing it.

Falkenstein was announced. He came in and looked from one to the other and said: "Quite a party. Whom have I the pleasure of meeting?"

"I am Sidney Lomas. You . . ."

"The chief of the Criminal Investigation Department? How do you do, sir? If that is a permitted greeting."

"You may not have met General Dermor . . ."

Falkenstein gave the General a bow and a smile.

"You know Mr. Waldo Rosen."

"Why, I was afraid he wouldn't own me. Thank you for those kind words."

"Sit down, Falkenstein," said Rosen.

"But I have not been introduced to the other member of the party."

"Mr. Fortune," Lomas told him.

Reggie opened half-shut eyes.

Falkenstein put up a hand in salute and laughed: "Now I shan't care how proud I am."

"Sit down," said Lomas.

Falkenstein swung the low chair round so that he sat facing the fire.

"Affairs have come to my knowledge which require explanation from you," Lomas went on.

"If I can assist you in any way I shall be delighted." Falkenstein took out a cigarette case.

"You were at Hartdean House on the night of Friday the twelfth. What did you do that evening?"

Falkenstein offered his case to Lomas, to Dermor, to Rosen and on their refusal lit a cigarette. "I am ashamed to say I did nothing, though there was nothing I could do."

"You might have gone to Radbury with Meon and helped in the rescue work there."

"If I had known he was going I should have accompanied him."

"Where were you when he started?"

"I was out in the grounds. Some time before the raid, a fire had been seen and most of us, if not all, were out looking at it."

"You spent the whole evening alone watching the fire and took no interest in the raid? Is that your statement?"

"Certainly not. As soon as I heard that Meon's factory had been bombed and he had gone there I proposed to follow him, but Lady Meon told me I could be of no use."

"Were you ever in Meon's study at Hartdean?"

"I had a short conference with Meon and Norton in the study before dinner."

"What about?"

"The link up of British and American production."

"And tank design?"

"We were not dealing with design."

"But you're familiar with it?"

"Only on the production side. What is the object of these questions?"

"I have a letter here," Lomas held out it. "Do you know the writing, Falkenstein?"

Falkenstein examined it. The pink and white of his smooth face became red. He threw his cigarette into the fire and looked up at Lomas and asked defiantly: "Where did you get this from?"

"Answer my question. Do you recognise the writing? You can compare it with other specimens if you like."

"Specimens of what?" Falkenstein's hands twitched on the letter.

"Of your writing."

"I am in no difficulty over that," said Falkenstein, but could not keep his hands still. "The writing is mine. I wrote the letter. What puzzles me is how you obtained it, and why you question me about it."

"Who is the man you wrote to?"

"Tommy Penrose—Captain Penrose, a gunner at Basdon Camp. I had promised I would look him up while I was down at Hartdean. We couldn't stay on after the raid, so I dropped him a line." Falkenstein read out the letter:

"Dear T.,

"I won't be able to get over this time, old son. But here's all the best.

"Max."

He turned in the low chair to confront the three looking down on him. "Do you pretend that means anything but what it says? Rosen! You had better tell your English friends Americans don't stand for police tricks, and this foolery with me will be resented our side."

"Cool off," said Rosen.

"You mentioned tricks, Falkenstein," said Lomas. "You say you wrote the letter to Captain Penrose. If it had been addressed to him it would not have been intercepted. It was posted in this envelope."

Falkenstein snatched the envelope and scrutinised the address. He flushed dark from collar to sleek yellow hair.

"The address is in your writing, isn't it?" said Lomas.

"No, no, I never wrote that," Falkenstein stammered. "It's

a forgery, it's a fake. I never wrote to any man in Ireland in my life."

"You admitted writing the letter. You admit the writing of the address resembles yours, but you say it is forged. Can you explain why anyone should take a letter you wrote to an American officer and send it to a man in Southern Ireland?"

"The explanation of the trick is your business, not mine. You won't fool anyone but yourselves with such a fraud."

"Where did you write the letter?"

"At Hartdean, of course, just before I came away."

"Where did you post it?"

Falkenstein examined the envelope again.

"Make up your mind," said Lomas.

Falkenstein was frowning. He answered slowly: "I didn't post it. I left it at Hartdean to be posted."

"Why?"

"Because I was returning to London and Tommy Penrose would get it quicker from Hartdean."

"Who is the person you accuse?"

"Accuse?" Falkenstein scowled up at him. "I accuse no one but you. You're trying to spring some fool trap on me with a stolen letter and a forged address. You won't find our folks stand for that."

"I have often heard threats from men in your position," Lomas smiled. "In whose hands did you leave the letter for posting?"

"No hands. I put it in the letter box in the hall at Hartdean."

"Then your explanation is someone there stole the letter and put it in another envelope and forged the address and posted it in London on October 14, that is on the Monday."

"I said nothing of the kind. You said your people intercepted the letter, which means stole it. Whether from Tommy Penrose or the mail you're a receiver of stolen goods. Who faked them when you had acquired them is for you to explain, not me."

"That's a poor effort, Falkenstein. The letter was not posted till you were in London. It was not addressed to Captain Penrose when we stopped it. Look at the other side of the letter."

Falkenstein fumbled as he turned it over. "What about it?" he exclaimed. "The page is blank."

"Hold it to the fire."

"No, thank you." Falkenstein tossed it away. "Play your own tricks."

"As he objects . . ." Lomas turned to Rosen.

"Sure." Rosen stood up and took the letter. "Watch it, Falkenstein."

"I am not interested," said Falkenstein with ostentatious contempt, but he did watch the heating. When the yellow characters and sketch appeared, he jerked himself back and laughed.

"There you are." Rosen put the letter on his knee. "I want to know what this stuff means."

Falkenstein gave it a sneering glance, picked it up, examined it carefully and flung it back at Rosen. "It means your English friends have made a stupid attempt to frame me."

"So?" Rosen asked.

"Are you acting for them? They've played the old police trick, a secret ink message forged on a man's papers which would incriminate him. You can see this message is nothing but a clumsy imitation of my writing."

"We hear you admit some resemblance, Falkenstein," said Lomas, "and admit the secret message would incriminate you if you wrote it. Now let us hear what reason you allege we have for making a false charge against you."

"I'm not finding reasons for your silly tricks. They're fundamentally unreasonable, spy mania."

"Spy?" Lomas repeated. "Is the information which the message gives of value to a German spy?"

"I know nothing about the message."

"But you have expert knowledge of armament manufacture and Meon's share in it. Does the specification in the message give particulars of a tank of new design?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been shown any new design."

"Have you never seen this one?"

"No, sir." Falkenstein sprang up. "That's the limit. I'm through. Make your charge with your faked, forged evidence against me in public if you dare." He laughed. "You know damned well you daren't."

As he made for the door a small, placid voice said: "One moment, Mr. Falkenstein." He was startled. He swung round and saw Reggie contemplating him dreamily. "About Captain Penrose," Reggie murmured. "Wonder if she went to Raster to meet him. I mean Miss Buckland."

Falkenstein muttered: "Impertinence!" and turned away.

"You won't leave London," Lomas told him. "Don't try."

Falkenstein marched out.

"Were we fair, Rosen?" Lomas asked.

"And more. What you gave him is a kind bedside manner to what he'd have got if I'd been handling him in the States."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Mr. Rosen," Dermor announced,

"I should myself have pressed him harder if he were an Englishman. But undoubtedly Lomas was right. It is of the first importance we should deal with the fellow in a manner which will not rouse American resentment." *

"Sure. Co-operation was always first priority. The way things are, this business might end in up a general everlasting smash."

"What's your estimate of Falkenstein's defence, Rosen?" Lomas asked.

"He had none, only threats."

"Quite. I'm much obliged to him. When a man threatens he will make it hot for the police if he is prosecuted he gives himself away."

"With simple private crime, yes. I allow Falkenstein did give himself away. But you can't cut out the international issues."

"Don't I know!" Lomas shrugged. "Is Falkenstein a blue-eyed boy with your people?"

"With big business. I would have said till lately he was well liked by all who knew him. Now the wise guys say he's yellow, and, would you believe it, gone wholly British."

"That eases the situation."

"No, sir. Big business takes care of its own. Falkenstein can pull strings. You bet he's pulling 'em now, good and hard, if he hasn't already."

A plaintive sound came from Reggie's chair.

Rosen turned. "Say it again."

"I wonder," said Reggie.

"You would. What's this dream?"

"Not dreamin'. Considerin' the evidence. Which you officials won't. Ignore fundamental fact, Mr. Falkenstein's nerve storm. Muscles, heart, mind out of control."

"Thank you, Reginald," said Lomas. "We did happen to notice the man was in a funk."

"But havin' noticed, yours not to reason why."

"Good gad, the reason is obvious. He knew he was caught."

"One possible hypothesis. Think that one over. Fellow knowin' he was guilty and caught might threaten and bluff, as you've been sayin'. Against that, fellow had a neat explanation of the letter, letter genuine, addressed and secret message forged. Quite natural he should write from Hartdean tellin' Captain Penrose at Basdon Camp he couldn't meet him as promised. Possible the letter was stolen from the Hartdean box and dirty work done. On the writin' question, General"—Reggie turned to Dermor—"your experts can't swear Falkenstein wrote the secret message, what?"

"In the nature of the case certainty is impossible. I have told you so. We can only demonstrate that the cramped secret writing has some of the highly individual characteristics of Falkenstein's hand."

"Which a forger who knew his job could put in. Remains the address. Resemblance to Falkenstein's writing plain, but not so close as the resemblance between the letter and other authentic letters. That struck Rosen. Struck me. And your people, General?"

"I wished to give full value to the point, and therefore omitted the qualifying circumstances. You will observe that the address is a short composition in a small space, giving little scope for the flourishes which Falkenstein affects. Moreover, an address must be written with some care to be legible, and legibility is not a feature of Falkenstein's slap-dash writing."

"True. Care was taken over the address. Possibly by Falkenstein. As your experts think. But a forger copyin' or tracin' would have to take care. Producin' much the same result."

"I appreciate the difficulty," said Dermor. "We cannot bring the case to a satisfactory conclusion by argument from the handwriting alone."

Lomas laughed. "Your ingenuity is marvellous, Reginald. You give us a lecture on why Falkenstein was in a funk, and end by telling us he had no reason to be."

"Didn't tell you that. Told you you have not found the reason. Think again. Your hypothesis, he knew he was caught. But he couldn't be by handwriting alone. Beyond that, Rosen backs his bluff American big business will protect him. And yet he had a nerve-storm. Why?"

"I hand it to you, you're great at objections, Fortune," said Rosen. "Here's my answer to this bunch. Falkenstein came here anticipating you had something on him, not knowing how much. The sight of the letter knocked him endways. He hadn't thought of that one. Still and all, he came prepared with a counter for anything—if you laid a hand on him his pull in America would raise the worst trouble yet. The prospect didn't attract him. He saw you might chance a smash, and break him, but he was fixed so he had to dare you."

"Interestin' hypothesis," said Reggie. "Work it out. It makes the Falkenstein affair one more operation in the offensive planned to set British and Americans fighting each other. Major operation. Another piece of the jig-saw puzzle, Rosen. Biggest piece yet."

Rosen grinned. "To use your own familiar words—may be."

"What exactly is this great thought, Reginald?" Lomas asked. "Do you assume Falkenstein planned the whole series of crimes?"

"Assume nothing. Admit the possibility. On present evidence, doubt if he was the principal."

"I am with you," said Rosen with vigour. "Falkenstein's reputation is tops for brains, subordinate, advising brains, but he's never wanted to play lead. That's why big business loves him. And we've verified here, and now he's short on guts."

"Not the sort of fellow who would be public enemy number one? Not likely, no. However. Consider all the evidence. Even in his nerve-storm avoided castin' any suspicion on the Hartdean crowd. Though that was the easiest way out for him. Obvious, what? Why didn't he say someone must have stolen the letter from the Hartdean box instead of sayin' the police faked it? Far more plausible, and we couldn't prove that was a lie."

Lomas shrugged. "The fellow lost his head, of course."

"Consider all the evidence. In the throes of nerve-storm fellow determined to keep Meon and party out of everything. Remember my little experiment. Hinted Margot Buckland knew a thing or two. His reaction was fury."

"Sure," Rosen agreed. "I wouldn't go very big on that myself. A man crazy about her would react that way. But I grant you, you can take it otherwise, and infer she was his accomplice in getting Meon's papers and the whole business."

"Can be taken both those ways—and other ways. Might infer little experiment suggested to him she or Meon or someone else had let him down."

"Meon?" said Rosen. "By jake! Meon?"

"Shouldn't exclude Meon. Shouldn't exclude anyone in the party."

"Damme, this is the fixed idea again," Lomas exclaimed. "Every one of them has a foul past though their credentials are good, and now you stress Meon in particular, though we know everything about him from his cradle."

"And sure, he is an honourable man, so are they all, all honourable men," Reggie murmured, "and women."

Dermor's austerity showed some cold pleasure as it spoke. "You fail to observe, Lomas, the good credentials of Falkenstein are worthless. I agree with Fortune everyone who was at Hartdean must be suspected. We are, therefore, bound to pursue enquiries into their records and their conduct throughout this affair. From that investigation you cannot exempt Meon."

Reggie enjoyed the spectacle of Lomas despising Dermor and

Dermor disregarding Lomas, then annoyed them both with a murmur: "Everybody for everybody else. Departments concerned with Meon should co-operate, what?"

"A report from them may assist you, Lomas," said Dermor.

"You may apply to them," said Lomas. "That is a matter for you, not me. I have no ground of action against Meon."

Rosen grinned. Reggie sighed. "First priority, avert international flare up. Yes. But equal first, prevent any more of their dam' German crimes, catch the leader."

"We are leaving that out," said Rosen. "We stopped at agreement the leader is not Falkenstein."

Lomas frowned at Reggie. "Do you seriously suggest Meon has become a German agent?"

"Might have," Reggie murmured.

"Good gad, it's incredible!"

"You think so? Chief German agent probably one of his crowd. Meon's behaviour odd throughout. Shy of me, tried to pump me. Knows more than he told. Same like Falkenstein."

Lomas meditated, and said slowly: "There are ways of handling Falkenstein without making a noise." He turned to Rosen. "Your intelligence people think he's too British. If they reported that I take it he would be recalled."

"And tell the tale on the other side he was framed by the British police. Not so hot, Lomas. You've tried your methods and they were fair and gentle, but they didn't get you any place. Let me try some of mine."

"Been hopin' you would," said Reggie.

"My dear fellow, by all means," said Lomas. "What do you propose?"

"I aim to open up Mr. Falkenstein with the idea some of his friends faked the letter so the whole blame should be on him if anything went wrong. As a good American how could I let him be the scapegoat of a British traitor? But he'll sure be for it, you're all set to hang him, the only way out is he should come clean and so on."

"We can't do that sort of thing," said Lomas.

"I know you can't," Rosen laughed.

"It is entirely justified." Dermor was pontifical.

"I have no objection to your making the attempt, Rosen," Lomas told him. "I doubt whether it will succeed with a man of Falkenstein's brains."

"You wouldn't believe how good I am as the crook's best friend," said Rosen. "Mr. Falkenstein has an apartment at Gave's Hotel. I'll go right there now."

Reggie contemplated Lomas and Dermor dreamily, and murmured: "Rosen is good. Though not departmental. You might get together." He whistled the refrain of a song of the moment: 'It'll take a lot of getting used to.' "More about Meon and friends, please." He stood up bit by bit and wandered out.

CHAPTER XXI

THE OPEN DOOR

GAVE's Hotel stood in a by-street of Mayfair. No inscription outside betrayed that it was a hotel. Its doorway suggested a club. It had been the town house of a statesman in Queen Victoria's golden age. Buying it from his widow, whose parties there were famous, the first Gave turned it into the most private of hotels for the most exclusive county families. His successors, equally sagacious, made changes with the changing years. The supply of county people who could pay Gave's prices dwindled, but the demand from others who would pay anything to be private and exclusive at a correct address went up, and with adaptation of the suites of the old place into self-contained apartments, with all modern comfort, prices went up, too, beyond the dreams of the original Gave.

The street was dark, the hotel blacked out. Rosen's car passed the door before he stopped. He caught a glimpse of someone loitering. As he walked back he snapped his cigarette lighter and saw a dapper young man not unlike Falkenstein in style.

Through double swing doors he entered the vestibule where a glass box contained an ancient porter with page boys. "Mr. Max Falkenstein, 11B, is waiting for me," he announced, and produced an official card. "Show me right up, please." The porter put on spectacles to study the card, took them off to look at him and said: "Herbert! 11B."

A page conducted him over a short flight of marble steps, then across an expanse of lounge, and put him in a lift which carried them slowly to the third floor. "11B, sir, last but one on the right," said the page. "Thank you, sir." Well tipped, he went down again.

Rosen moved silently along the dim-lit corridor. People were talking. The door of 11B stood open. He could see its hall and something of a room beyond. People were talking there. A man's

voice, not Falkenstein's, thin, sharp. Woman's voice, husky contralto.

"You push off, quick," from the man.

"Don't be a fool. We must see it through now," from the woman.

Rosen marched in, calling: "Falkenstein!" Falkenstein lay between them on the hearth-rug. His right hand held a pistol. His face was covered with blood.

"Stand fast, you!" Rosen barked at them, strode over the body to a wall bracket which supported a white telephone, lifted the receiver with one finger and thumb and dialled Scotland Yard. "Waldo Rosen here. Personal call for Mr. Lomas. Rush it. . . . Rosen speaking from Falkenstein's. Just arrived, and found him shot and two persons present. . . . I wouldn't know. . . . Sure, I'll hold 'em. Get Fortune to come with your homicide squad."

Going delicately, he moved from the telephone, inspected Falkenstein's wounds, felt for the pulse, and turned upon the man and the woman. "I am Waldo Rosen, of the United States service," he told them. "Who are you?"

"My name is Norton, Major Norton," the little man was in a breathless hurry to answer. "This lady is Miss Buckland; we're both friends of Mr. Falkenstein's, we came to look him up, and found him like this."

"Aha. Major Norton and Miss Buckland. Did you become interested in Max Falkenstein through your connexion with Sir Thomas Meon, or how?"

"Why, of course," Margot exclaimed. "We had never heard of him till he came over on business and Cousin Tom—Sir Thomas Meon—met him. Since then we've seen a lot of him, and we were great friends."

"Why did you have to look him up this late this evening?"

"He phoned us," said Margot.

"Both of you?"

"He phoned me at Meon's office," said Norton. "I was out, but they told me when I came back. He phoned Miss Buckland at Lady Meon's house."

"So? And you two came here together?"

"Yes. I went round by the office and brought Major Norton," said Margot.

"How long had you been here before I arrived?"

"Only a minute or two," said Norton. "We were just going to phone for a doctor."

"You found Falkenstein lying dead like that?"

"I didn't think he was dead," said Norton.

"And you, Miss Buckland?"

"I couldn't tell. He looked dead."

"How did you get in?"

"The door was open," said Norton.

CHAPTER XXII

ARGUMENT

ROSEN surveyed the room. Nothing seemed out of place, he could see no sign of a struggle. Even the hearth-rug, across which Falkenstein lay, spread smooth. Easy chairs stood to the right and left of the fire. Next the wall by the right one was a wireless cabinet, and on the top of it a silver cigar-box and an empty glass. The white telephone could be reached from the chair by stretching.

He picked up a note-book of telephone numbers. Meon's house number, office number, Hartdean number, Falkenstein had them all down, and Mrs. Denlan's.

Quiet swift movement came to his ears, he turned, and saw Lomas and another man in the room, more waiting outside.

"Just like this," he made a comprehensive gesture. "Miss Buckland, Mr. Norton, Mr. Sidney Lomas."

Lomas put up his eyeglass. "Good evening. You will understand that the police require statements from you both. We can't take them here, so I must ask you to go to Scotland Yard. Inspector Sacdon has a car for you."

Margot swept out.

"Very well," said Norton. "When I have phoned Sir Thomas I shall be at your service."

"We are in communication with Meon," Lomas told him.

"This way, please." Sacdon shepherded him after Margot.

"Two babies with more than a single thought," said Rosen.

"Though they tell the same tale together. Hallo!"

Reggie sped across the room. "Yes. I'm here, yes. Poor me," he complained. "You have been goin' it." He dropped on one knee beside Falkenstein . . . his round face was grave . . . he stood up and asked sharply: "Done this phone for prints?"

"Not yet," said Rosen.

"Damn. Want my hospital." Reggie ran out.

Lomas nodded to an inspector in charge of finger-print men

and photographers. "Carry on. We had better go through the rest of the place, Rosen."

From the hall they passed to a dining-room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a second bedroom, all without any trace of disturbance. "An uncommon spacious apartment for a bachelor," said Lomas.

"There's no service door, no other entry," said Rosen.

They were in the hall again. Reggie came back breathless. "Hospital ambulance on the way. Now then. Where can we talk?"

They took him into the dining-room.

"Hospital?" Lomas asked. "The fellow's not dead?"

"Not yet, no," Reggie murmured.

Lomas stared at Rosen. "You told me . . ."

"Speaking in the presence of those two babies," Rosen grinned. "They reckoned he was."

"Good gad! Will he come through, Reginald?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Or, if he does, in what shape he'll be. Don't know whether an operation is possible till he's X-rayed. Get Masledon on the job. Best man in London. Difficult case. Two bullets fired into mouth. One came out near root of nose. Other still inside somewhere. Where, exactly, makes all the difference. Bullets small calibre. Still!"

"The pistol in his hand is a .22 Philp, the smallest on the market," said Rosen.

"Never met one before. American make, what?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well. Hallo!" Reggie hurried out.

They followed, saw ambulance men with a stretcher, watched Reggie take the pistol from Falkenstein's hand and direct the arrangement and removal of the body.

"That bein' that," he turned to the inspector. "Your fellows done their stuff?"

"We have practically finished this room, sir."

"Splendid. Might try the others."

The inspector took his men away.

Reggie wandered round the room, looking at its several little tables, and at the larger one in a corner on which were three or four tumblers, a siphon, a bottle of Scotch whisky and an empty decanter.

"He didn't have much choice of drinks in here," said Rosen. "But there's a cocktail cabinet in the dining-room."

"Man of simple though spacious habits," said Reggie. "Hadn't been drinkin' a cocktail to-night, judgin' from the tumbler on the wireless by chair in which he was presumably sittin'." Reggie

approached it with measuring glances to one side and the other, and finally at the ceiling. "There," he pointed. "Speck, what?"

Rosen pulled one of the tables across, put a small chair on top of it, climbed on to the chair and examined the ceiling with fingers and penknife. He came down and held out his hand. In the palm was a little bullet, the plaster dust clinging to it damp and dark.

"That's a .22 all right, Fortune," he said. "It wasn't deep in. It wouldn't have much velocity after passing through Falkenstein's face bones, I reckon. You expected it up there. How do you reconstruct the crime?"

"I should say Falkenstein was in the easy chair right of the fire. Two shots from the pistol found in his right hand fired close to his mouth. Couldn't distinguish much powder stain for blood, but some line of penetration and of bullet found in ceiling shows pistol pointed up when fired. After which he collapsed from chair on floor."

"You mean it's a case of suicide," said Lomas.

"Could be. On the facts we have."

"How many suicides shoot themselves through the mouth?" Rosen objected.

"Not the most popular place, but often used."

"How many suicides shoot twice?"

"Not a lot. But it happens."

"Is that so?" Rosen's formidable chin thrust out. He gave Reggie a sombre stare. "This sort of a toy pistol is a woman's gun, not a man's."

"Sort of gun a woman could buy in England?" Reggie murmured. "I think not. My dear chap! Don't be cross. One striking fact about the pistol, it's peculiarly American. However. Must be considered with other facts we have not yet worked out. Empty glass. Empty decanter. Full bottle of whisky. Apparently Mr. Falkenstein found the exact amount he wanted in the decanter." Reggie moved to the glass and bent over it. "Apparently drank every drop that ever was in it. Which could easily be. Also drank the smell of whisky. Which could not." He went into the hall and summoned the inspector. "Any prints on glass and decanter?"

"There are none distinguishable, sir. It wasn't likely we'd get one clear. Both articles are deep cut, you will notice."

"I did, yes." Reggie returned, and pulled out the stopper of the decanter. "Here, again, no smell of whisky. No smell of anything." He gazed at Lomas and Rosen. "Raises new problem,

interestin' and important problem. What was it Falkenstein drank?"

"Soda water," said Lomas. "There's the siphon. You drink soda water neat yourself. A dreary habit, not confined to you."

"When thinkin' of suicide does a man drink soda water? No experience myself. But I doubt it. Further to that, decanter wet inside, though clean and odourless."

"You mean the decanter was recently washed," said Rosen.

"Oh, yes, yes. Impossible to dry the inside. Raisin' same problem under another form. Why was decanter washed?"

"Because the whisky in it had been doped," said Rosen. "Falkenstein came in and gave himself a high ball. The dope made him unconscious or helpless, so he couldn't resist. Then he was shot in a way that would pass for suicide. The gunman—or woman—put the pistol in his right hand as confirmatory evidence, and afterwards washed out the decanter to remove the dope, and wash out suspicion of murder."

"Yes, I think so," Reggie murmured.

"Great stuff, Fortune," said Rosen.

"Very ingenious," said Lomas. "There is a good deal to be said on the other side. When you examined the body, Reginald, did you see any indication of dope?"

"No. None to be seen. Blood all over face and eyes. Temperature low. That don't indicate a thing."

"What do you suggest was used?"

"Some narcotic. Which, I haven't the slightest idea. At present. Probably get it."

"For the dope and murder theory you must assume someone entered in Falkenstein's absence and put enough dope into the whisky for a single drink to make him helpless yet not enough for him to notice the taste. Is that possible?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Has been done with various narcotics."

"But there are time factors. Suppose Falkenstein came straight here from Scotland Yard. Even so, he wasn't here a couple of hours before Rosen found him shot. Can you fix the time of the shooting?"

"No. No certainty. I should say he'd been shot about an hour when I came."

"Very well. That leaves very little time for the drug to take effect."

"Might make him helpless in a few minutes."

"But the dope merchant and the gunman would require time for preparation."

"As you say. And for clearin' up after."

"Exactly. You assume someone determined to murder Falkenstein in such a manner that it would seem he committed suicide, and his visit to Scotland Yard gave the opportunity."

"More than that. The reason."

"I don't follow."

"My dear chap! Any afternoon Falkenstein was out gave opportunity to dope his whisky and shoot him when he'd returned and had a drink. Why did someone decide he must be killed this evening? Because someone knew you'd sent for him, that is, knew he was under suspicion, and though uncertain what defence he might make, estimated that the police, on discoverin' he'd committed suicide immediately after they questioned him, would have no doubt he was a German agent. Which would not go down with Falkenstein's American friends. On the contrary. Put their important backs up. Priceless advance towards the major objective, big bad trouble between England and America."

"You started with the idea the Falkenstein letter was part of the Radbury crime series, and Falkenstein scapegoat for someone," said Rosen. "You're going good."

"This is fairly plausible, but it evades the difficulties," Lomas objected. "In the first place no one had any means of knowing we suspected Falkenstein."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Persons who arranged secret ink message should be written and sent on his letter."

"If you choose to assume he didn't write the message himself."

"Mind open. Assume nothing. Obvious someone besides Falkenstein knew an espionage letter was bein' sent to Casey, care of Bay, Cork. Otherwise Casey wouldn't collect it. Easy for anyone keepin' in touch with Falkenstein to know he'd been taken to Scotland Yard."

"Sure," Rosen grinned. "And no one keeps closer touch with him than the Meon crowd. Notably Miss Margot Buckland, as Fortune proved by his little experiment, and I verified when I caught her here with her other boy friend, Major Norton, who is up to the neck in Meon's jobs."

"We have something like a prima facie case against that couple," Lomas agreed reluctantly.

"Prima facie be damned," said Rosen. "They have a hell of a lot to explain, and they began with the feeblest story ever. How come they were in Falkenstein's room and he lying dead to the world? Oh, they found the door of the apartment open. It would be, wouldn't it? He committed suicide before they came along,

but he didn't bother to shut his door first. Suicides always prefer the open door."

"You can turn the argument round," Lomas answered. "They shot him, but they didn't think of shutting the door though pistol shots make some noise. Murderers never object to being caught with the body."

"I take it they were all set to push off, they'd just opened the door when I came along and stopped 'em," Rosen retorted.

"But you found them in the room," said Lomas, "not in the hall."

"'Heard great argument about it and about,'" Reggie murmured. "'But evermore came out by the same door wherein I went.' You can argue all night. Want more facts. Falkenstein should yield me some. See what you can get from the happy pair." He hurried out.

CHAPTER XXIII

THREE STORIES

"ONE minute, Lomas," said Rosen, and took up the telephone. "Waldo Rosen speaking. Priority cable to Washington, please. Philp pistol .22, number D.7395. What retailer dealt with it. Can retailer give name and description of purchaser."

"Hopeful, aren't you?" Lomas shrugged.

"No. I don't hope much from that, but I'm not missing any chances. . . ."

They sat down in Lomas's room and heard a report from the finger-print expert. Prints of the same hand, probably male, on door handles, on the telephone, on the siphon, on the wireless cabinet; no prints at all on the glass, the decanter, or the whisky bottle. Prints of a different hand, probably female, on the head of the bedstead and the cupboard beside it. No other prints anywhere."

"I take it the male was Falkenstein and the female a housemaid," said Lomas.

"Sure."

"And that goes equally well with suicide or murder in gloves."

"No, sir. Taken together, the presence of Falkenstein's prints on the siphon and the absence of prints on the empty, washed-out decanter prove murder. Oh, say, I forgot to tell you in the hustle. When I arrived at the hotel there was a guy loitering round

outside, and from what I saw of him he had a sort of look of Falkenstein."

Lomas laughed. "Thanks for the compliment. You saw Sergeant Mardale, one of our bright young things. He was there in case Falkenstein tried to bolt."

"I wish he'd been inside, upstairs, on Falkenstein's door."

"So do I," said Lomas. "But if we had tried that we should have let the hotel people know, and it would have gone round the town a detective was watching Falkenstein. The last thing we wanted."

"You're right," Rosen agreed vigorously. "Murder's not a circumstance to an international smash. Still, we've got to get the would-be killer. Let's put those two babies through it."

"Lady first," Lomas smiled, and telephoned orders.

A large paternal superintendent brought Margot, and overcame her reluctance to sit in the low chair.

She was pale, but she sat erect, a blaze of defiance from her dark eyes flamed up at Lomas. "Why have you kept me waiting all this time?" The deep, husky voice rose loud.

"There were other enquiries to be made," said Lomas. "You are not the only person concerned, Miss Buckland. Tell me, was this evening the first time you called on Mr. Falkenstein?"

"Of course not. I've often been to his place for tea and cocktails."

"With Major Norton or alone?"

"Alone and at a party. I don't remember Major Norton being there, but I dare say he was sometimes."

"How would you describe the relations between you and Falkenstein and Major Norton?"

"Friendly."

"On the night of the Radbury raid were you in Falkenstein's company from the alert till long after the raid was over?"

She showed surprise and irritation, and flung him one word of answer: "Yes."

"What did you do all that time?"

"We were out watching the fire."

"Next day Falkenstein came back to London. Did you see any letter he left for posting at Hartdean?"

"No. Why should I?"

"To-night Mr. Rosen found you and Major Norton in Falkenstein's room. How long had you been there?"

"A minute or two."

"And before that visit, when were you last in the room?"

"I'm not sure. Some days ago."

"Had you a latch-key to Falkenstein's door?"

"That's a damned impudent question. No! The door was open when I got there."

"How do you explain his being shot with the door open?"

She flushed. For the first time she faltered, and looked away. "I can't explain it. I can't think how. But it was like that."

"You are suggesting he killed himself."

"I'm not. He wouldn't. Why should he?"

"You told Mr. Rosen you went to Falkenstein's room because he rang you up. What did he say?"

"He said he had rung Major Norton and couldn't get him; there had been the devil of a break, and he wanted him to come round at once, could I get hold of him. I rang Cousin Tom's—Sir Thomas Meon's—office, and they said Major Norton was in conference. I said they must tell him, and went to Mr. Falkenstein's myself at once. I got there, and found the door open and him lying dead. Then Major Norton came, and we'd hardly realised when Mr. . . . Mr. Rosen came."

"You are sure Falkenstein was dead when you arrived?"

"Yes, he lay on the floor and his face was covered with blood, and he was cold."

"Was there a pistol in his hand?"

"A pistol?" she repeated, and hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"You just said he wouldn't have killed himself. Who is it you suspect of killing him?"

"No one. I can't think why anyone should."

"But you said Falkenstein told you 'there had been the devil of a break,' and you went to him at once. What did you think the break was?"

"I couldn't imagine."

"Then why did you think the break concerned you?"

"I didn't." She looked up at Lomas, and her eyes were misty.

"Yes, I did, in a way," the deep voice fell low. "He spoke as if he was hard hit, and I liked him."

"You must expect more questions, Miss Buckland," said Lomas sharply. "We will send you home now."

The paternal superintendent ushered her out.

"Clever," said Rosen. "She's thrown down the story she told me on the spot, Norton and she arrived together. Now she puts Norton in the clear at her own expense. No cruel cop can suspect such a simple, honest wench. And I bet you her boy friend Norton

sticks to it they did arrive together, she wasn't one split second alone with Falkenstein."

The superintendent led Norton to the low chair.

"What do you know about Falkenstein's 'devil of a break'?" Lomas asked truculently.

"Is that how you speak of his death?" Norton retorted. "I know no more about it than you."

"You won't help yourself by evasion. Miss Buckland has told me Falkenstein phoned her 'there had been the devil of a break,' and he wanted you, and she sent you a message immediately."

"I can't recall the exact words." Norton was quite at his ease. "Falkenstein rang the office while I was with Meon, and our people don't interrupt conferences. So Falkenstein rang Miss Buckland, and she put through an urgent message. I've never heard of his being in any sort of trouble, and I haven't a guess what he meant."

"When did you see him last?"

"This morning. He came to see Meon at the office."

"Then I suppose you know he came here this afternoon?"

"The deuce he did! Then why on earth didn't you protect him?"

"Protect him from whom?"

"Don't play the fool." Norton jumped up. "Either he came to make a complaint or you had him brought for enquiries. Whichever it was, you should have given him protection afterwards. If you'd done your obvious duty Falkenstein would be alive now. You're responsible for his death."

"Sit down," said Lomas, but Norton only moved to stand in front of the fire. "You suggest Falkenstein was involved in some dangerous affair."

"The suggestion isn't mine, it's yours. I accepted your statement he came to the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. People don't do that unless they or you are dealing with something that looks serious."

"You thought the affair so serious you rushed off to Falkenstein as soon as Miss Buckland phoned you, though you deny you knew he'd been with me. What kind of affair did you think it was upset him?"

"You're wasting your time. I told you just now I haven't a guess what he meant, I still haven't. Falkenstein was the last man on earth to put a foot wrong, too straight and too careful. How you handled him is the question. On your own showing you've made a wicked mess."

"Did you phone Miss Buckland you were going to Falkenstein?"

"I didn't phone her at all."

Rosen broke in. "Did you tell Meon of her message Falkenstein wanted you bad?"

Norton swung round on him, "Yes, naturally I told Meon, and he broke off the conference and I finished my notes and went."

"What was Meon's opinion?" Rosen asked.

"He said I'd better find out what was biting Falkenstein."

Lomas resumed. "Did Miss Buckland or you get there first?"

"I did. I was in the room a minute or two before she came."

"That contradicts what she told Rosen in your hearing, that you arrived together. You didn't contradict her then."

"I didn't think it worth while. Together is roughly right, but as you want to be exact I was there first by a few minutes."

Rosen grinned. "It wouldn't take all of a few minutes to shoot him."

"I suppose when you go shooting a man you tell people you're going to his place."

"Would you be surprised to hear Miss Buckland has just told us quite a different story about you?" Lomas asked.

"Not in the least. I expected she would tell you she was in the room some time before me. That's a woman's self-sacrificing lie. She told it to clear me of any fool charge I shot him."

Rosen laughed. "Can't a man tell self-sacrificing lies, Norton? To clear his girl of a murder charge—would you hesitate, or would you?"

"She doesn't need clearing. No charge against her or me will stand up. You know that as well as I do, whatever tricks you played on Miss Buckland."

Lomas snapped at him. "Your explanation of the three contradictory stories you and she have told comes to this—each of you realised there was good reason for suspecting both, so each determined the other must be cleared."

"You won't get away with that," said Norton placidly. "You daren't try in public. I've had enough of you in private. Where's Miss Buckland?"

"Do you want to arrange another story?"

"I'm going home. If you've kept her here till now I'll take her or you'll be in worse trouble than you are. Well?"

"You may go and report yourself to Meon. Take care to inform him that your statements have not satisfied me, and I shall want you for further enquiries."

"So you had sense enough to let her go. The answer to your threat is, I shan't be here in private again nor will Miss Buckland."

Norton went out, the superintendent suffering from shock, on his heels.

Rosen turned to Lomas with a sardonic grin. "We're down for the count, brother. How did we get the idea that boy was a dud? I reckon Fortune sold it us, having bought it from Lady Meon."

"Brazen little rascal." Lomas choked down temper. "He bluffed well. They often do at the first time of asking. But he's made his position worse than it was."

"Oh, sure. I'm not falling for his curse on you. That's the oldest trick in the crook trade. His position's rotten. He never faced up to the facts. Not a word of the open door. He didn't think that needed explanation. He took pains to tell a story which made it all but impossible things happened the way they did happen unless he shot Falkenstein. Then he rode off on his nobility in clearing Miss Buckland. Rotten and worse. But what's our position? Charge him, and the girl will swear blind she was first in the room. Likely he'd swear he was. Would a British jury convict the boy? I guess not. Do we want a sensational trial over Falkenstein ending by the acquittal of the accused? We've got to avoid that."

"Any trial concerning Falkenstein may be *in camera*," Lomas answered.

"Which gives the worst kind of publicity."

"I don't propose to make a charge till I have more evidence. There are several lines of enquiry. Mardale, the young fellow watching the hotel from the street, failed to spot Norton, but he thinks the girl came in a taxi by herself some time before you. We should be able to find the taxi driver. The hotel porter may identify them, and remember when they came. There must be people staying in the hotel who heard the shots and have a notion of the time."

"A dandy little pistol like the Philp .22 don't make much noise. You remember the radio set by the fire. My guess is that was turned on to cover the shots."

"With the door open?"

"The more I think of the open door, the less I believe in anything. Say Norton or the girl shot him, and were just pushing off when I got there. Would anyone shoot a man with the door open? Would anyone who had shot a man open the door to quit and then stay talking things over? I . . ."

He was interrupted by the telephone buzz. "Speaking," said Lomas, and passed him a second receiver.

Reggie's voice came through. "Operation successful. Even chance patient will survive. Drug was chloral hydrate. The

common crook stuff. Knockout drops. Anything from our Major Norton and the magnificent Margot?"

"They contradict themselves like the devil."

"Does he? I wonder. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIV

TAXI TO THE CENOTAPH

It is maintained by Reggie that the only man who did any work on the case in England was Underwood. This pleases Rosen, but not Lomas.

Underwood spent the evening at Euston station in the dark purloins along the cab rank, an admirable example of perseverance encouraged by thought. He had passed two evenings there, and gone empty away.

Enquiries at Raster left little doubt that Alfred Roget, dressed in a grey suit and brown coat he had stolen there, travelled by the evening train to London, which arrived at ten fifteen. Underwood felt sure Roget did not know his way about London, would be in a hurry to go to ground, and therefore would take a taxi. The taxi drivers who waited for fares at Euston so late were few. None of those on the rank when Underwood made his two attempts could remember a man resembling his description of Roget.

He told himself it was not likely they would after dark, with nothing that stuck out in the description, then thought the description over, and decided he was a silly ass and cheered up. Of course, something stuck out if he had had the sense to realise the effect. Dead man's effects, as the Air Force brass hat said. Roget had lost his teeth—top front teeth. He wouldn't be able to talk plain.

Thus inspired, Underwood devoted a third evening to Euston, and on the stroke of ten made contact with one of the few regular taxi drivers who well remembered picking up a bloke who lisped. "The thenotaph," says he, "so the driver narrated. "'You know the thenotaph, don't you?' he says, angry like at me not making head or tail of him. 'The thenotaph in Whitehall.' 'Oh, the cenotaph, you mean,' I told him. 'Thath right, thath what I thaid,' says the bloke, 'make it thlippy.' And to the cenotaph I drove him."

"Queer place for a man that time of night," said Underwood.

"Oh, no. It's a point, don't you see, easier than trying to find

this number or that in the blackout. He knew where he was when he was by the cenotaph. He gave me a ten-bob note and buzzed off."

"Which way did he go?"

"Westminster, so far as I saw."

"Would you know him again?"

"If I heard him talk I would. Not by his looks."

Underwood gave the cabman another ten shillings, took his number, and told him to keep his mouth shut.

The cenotaph and then towards Westminster! Underwood chuckled. From that the fellow might have been going to the Yard. He must have gone close by the gates. Of all the brazen cheek!

Obviously he was making for a good hole somewhere near. Right under the nose of the Yard? Talk about being safest next the fire when the chimney smokes! But there couldn't be a safe doss house for crooks in the neighbourhood of the Yard and the Abbey, and that part of Westminster. A bit farther on, in the Pimlico back streets, yes, or just across the bridge in Lambeth.

An American crook who didn't know London well, how would he find his way to a shy place through the black out? Most likely he had arranged someone should meet him by the cenotaph.

Underwood went home and rang up divisional officers. The Pimlico expert was not encouraging, pointed out that there were many disreputable houses in which Roget might lie up as long as he had cash, knew no reason to suspect any particular one of harbouring crooks, and promised enquiries with little hope they would succeed. Lambeth's expert, at first resentful of so late a call, came smartly to attention as soon as he understood Roget had escaped from an American camp. Deserters and shirkers were giving a lot of trouble. He'd roped in one bunch the other day, he wouldn't be surprised if Roget had come across to Lambeth. With parts of the division a regular rabbit warren, and bombed houses and evacuated houses everywhere, they had plenty of hiding holes. He had his eye on several places, but it was a bit after the fair to start tracing the man, and besides, the description wasn't too good. If only Underwood had a photograph!

"I have better," said Underwood. "I have his front teeth. At least he hasn't, he's lost 'em. He talkth with a lithp."

Lambeth agreed that was something. Did Underwood mean the cove had false teeth and dropped 'em somewhere? Why, then, he'd do his damndest to get a new set.

Underwood, having thus led local talent to the opinion which he

had formed himself, applauded it as a great idea, and suggested enquiries of the dentists in the district.

That would be no end of a job, Lambeth answered, but didn't mind trying, and accepted Underwood's proposal to come over first thing in the morning.

So two unobtrusive shabby nobodies walked round the dubious places: a slum area not far from the river, decayed streets more remote with houses which had been genteel, and still made some pretence that the occupants were well off.

These interested Underwood, and he asked for particulars of them. One was a night club, one run by a bookie's lady friend who threw parties, gambling hell almost ripe for a raid, one let off the back as offices for little firms bombed out of the city, mostly neutrals, Swiss and Swedes and Spanish. Though evacuated firms could be found all over London Underwood felt this congregation of neutrality odd.

So he said it would be worth while to keep that house under continuous observation, and meantime what about the dentists in the neighbourhood?

Some hours at the telephone discovered a dentist in a more opulent part of the district who, on the day after Roget's return to London, had received a new patient needing a denture for the front of his upper jaw. A mould had been taken, the denture was being made, and the man was to call for it next day. He left no address, saying he was a commercial traveller always on the move. The dentist thought the police description something like him, but didn't notice his clothes or any peculiarity, and couldn't identify him except by the denture mould.

"Not too bad," Underwood chuckled. "We ought to get him to-morrow. Useful things, dead men's effects."

CHAPTER XXV

ANGRY WREN

PLEASED with himself, he made haste to Scotland Yard. The paternal Superintendent Hublet, in charge of the London end of the Radbury affair, agreed that he had done well with the proviso that he must bring it before Mr. Lomas, and Mr. Lomas was up to the eyes in work.

By consumption of a belated, meagre lunch, a sandwich and

whisky soda, Lomas was trying to recover from an encounter with an angry Wren.

First Officer Evelyn Shovell-Raxon, small, red brick of face, stormed in upon him and rasped out her name and rank and questions. Why didn't he report to her at once? What had he been doing? What was the present position? Giving him no time to answer, she told him that if he hadn't treated the affair with levity he would know she was Vere Bleaney-Raxon's cousin, and nearest surviving relation, and informed her of his murder, and asked for her assistance. Through that culpable neglect she had only just heard the facts. She was stationed in Scotland, but he could have obtained her address from the Admiralty. Instead of which he left her to learn by the newspapers the boy had been murdered. Did he suppose he could hush it up?

As soon as Lomas discovered that she was talking about the conscientious objector burnt in the rickyard fire he made an attempt at interruption. "Pray control yourself, madam. I regret you were not informed of your cousin's death. The reason is we were unable to trace any member of the family."

"Then you can't have made any effort," she retorted, angrier than ever, furiously unable to believe that her existence was unknown, that the Bleaney-Raxons and the Shovell-Raxons were obscure people. "I see. Because Vere was a conscientious objector you thought no one would care what happened to him, and you needn't put yourself to any trouble about it. No, his murder was very convenient for you, you could put the blame for anything on his dead shoulders."

"If you have come here to make some charge against the police, madam," said Lomas, "you had better put it clearly."

"I came here to make you do your duty. My cousin Vere was murdered."

"You have told me so several times. You have given me no evidence for that statement."

"Evidence! The evidence is as plain as a pikestaff."

"Is that all you have to say?" Lomas asked.

"No. You can't silence me. If you don't act on what I tell you, I shall publish it straight away."

"I am not affected by threats."

"Oh, yes, you are. You can't help yourself, my good sir. Hold your tongue and listen."

Heaven knew she hadn't any use for conscientious objectors, but some of them were better fellows than the embusqués. Vere was a crank from birth, but he ran straight, he wouldn't take up a

soft option in the civil service or business, he went where some fool department sent him, to the Radbury factory. Did Lomas pretend to know nothing about that place? He must have heard Sir Thomas Meon, the motor-car man, had made trouble there.

"I have heard nothing of the kind," said Lomas.

"Then you've chosen to be deaf," she barked. "You won't get away with that now."

Vere had written to her he expected he would not be much longer in Radbury. Meon and a worm of an underling, Major Norton, were often at the factory. They wanted all the machine tools for the Meon works, they had got some, and would no doubt get the rest, there was talk of government powers used to commandeer. Officials always played into the hands of big business. With all the Radbury productive power concentrated in Meon's works he would do very well.

That was one letter. A second, written the day before the raid, opened with a lyrical description of Carrie Marsh and a night walk with her under the Hartdean woods, and proceeded to narrate hurriedly how on his return through the dark Vere heard voices discussing the Meon plant, and the way it might be bombed, and was nearly run down by Norton in a car.

She glared at Lomas. "The next night but one Meon's works were bombed. The next night but one Vere was murdered on his way to meet this girl Marsh again, and she, too, both of them out in the country, where he heard the talk of bombing Meon's works, and Norton tried to run him down."

"These statements by your cousin will be investigated, madam," said Lomas. "You may rely upon that."

"I'll see they are," she told him. "I rely on myself and my friends. I am writing to the Raddonshire coroner, and to the *Daily Post*."

"You . . ." Lomas began, but the little woman sprang up and marched out.

CHAPTER XXVI

COMFORTERS

As he ate his belated meagre tray lunch Reggie wandered in, contemplated the sandwich, and was profoundly sympathetic. "My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap! Too bad. What is this? Zeal or indigestion?"

"Have you ever met a Wren?" Lomas asked.

"Yes. Joan knows flocks of em'. Earnest but delightful."

"Mine did not take after Mrs. Fortune. A ferocious female. Do you remember your infernal conscientious objector burnt in the rickyard?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Always thought you might have done more with him. Who is the lady?"

Lomas gave a bitter and resentful account of her. . . .

"Well, well. He was conscientious, the late Vere Bleaney-Raxon. Wicked business. Poor beggar."

"Damme, I'm not accepting this stuff," Lomas exploded. "It's plain enough he had a general grouse against Meon & Co., he was flighty, and suspicious of everything he came across."

"Yes. Also plain he had good reason to be suspicious. Letter not a flight of fancy after raid, but what he'd heard passin' the rickyard two nights before; heard Roget and another or others makin' arrangements for fire to guide raiders."

"By his own account he heard nothing definite," Lomas protested. "You put a construction on the letter after the event."

"Which is our job. Part of our job. Haven't shone in any part as yet. Study to improve. With help provided by the conscientious objector at cost of his life. Decent fellow. Quaint world. He wouldn't fight in uniform. But he fought to the death for a rickyard."

This did not soothe Lomas, who retorted: "His stories are fantastic. If you believe him when he says Meon and Norton were concentrating fresh machinery in Meon's works you can't believe they had anything to do with the raid on the works."

"Oh, my Lomas! Larger concentration of power, stronger motive for German bombing. Norton nearly ran over Bleaney-Raxon the night arrangements were made. Someone killed Bleaney Raxon for trying to stop the raid and the fire. Killer may have been Norton or Meon or the American with false teeth, or anyone who knew what the Meon works were doin'. Was some who knew. By the way—came to tell you—Falkenstein doin' better than expected. Not talkin', of course, won't for a long time, but something may be obtained soon. Another go at Norton might help, what?"

A tap on the door introduced Superintendent Hublet mildly hinting Mr. Lomas would like to see Underwood.

"Bless him!" Reggie sat up. "You would like, wouldn't you, Lomas?" and Lomas nodded, and Underwood came in and told his tale of Roget and the cenotaph and the Lambeth house and the dentist . . .

"My dear chap!" Reggie was fervent. "Best police work of our time."

"It's only a hope, sir," Underwood answered. "I haven't got him yet. I haven't even seen him. I can't be sure he's our man. I'm just relying on the false teeth."

"A long shot," said Lomas. "But quite justified. Thanks, Underwood. Bring him in as soon as you can. Fix things up with Hublet."

"Very good, sir." Underwood left them.

"Thank heaven for something definite at last." Lomas lit a cigarette.

"Always had plenty," Reggie murmured. "Thank heaven Underwood made use of some."

"The teeth are decisive."

"As you say. Teeth will prove man is Roget. Or not. Ought to be. Underwood deserves that."

"There's another point. The fellow was in London yesterday. He may have shot Falkenstein."

"Yes. Possible. Yes. Knockout drops suggest a crook. American pistol suggests an American. Cunning cover of the crime in Roget's known style. Better tell Rosen. He wouldn't like bein' left out, and he's all right with Underwood."

Lomas nodded, rang up Rosen, asked him to come round.

"One more point. Curious and interestin' point. Roget, if it is Roget, went to lodge in an out of the way house where Swedish and Spanish firms have offices. Which suggests Toll, the helpful Toll. Shouldn't confine observation to that house and the dentist's. Keep an eye on Toll's residence. Where does he reside?"

Lomas used another phone and answered: "Ligonier Court. That is somewhere behind Victoria Street."

"Also handy for the cenotaph. Where the fellow left his taxi?"

"Good gad! You mean Toll picked him up there?"

"Could be."

The telephone buzzed . . . "Very well. When I ring," said Lomas, and cocked an eyebrow at Reggie. "Did you expect any-one?"

"No. No one in particular. Norton would not surprise me. Nor Miss Buckland. Both have probably thought again."

Lomas laughed. "For once it's on record you did not guess right. This is Meon."

"Well, well. I'm too modest. Had no idea I'd make such an impression."

"You have no reason to suppose you've made any at all. I take

it the old man is worried by my handling of Miss Buckland and Norton." Lomas rang for him.

Meon came in briskly, stopped short as he saw Reggie, said: "Good afternoon," and looked at Lomas and said: "I have no objection to Mr. Fortune's presence, but my business with you is confidential."

"The Falkenstein business?" Lomas asked. "Fortune knows all about that."

"Very good. If you don't mind, I don't. I've just been talking to General Dermor. He told me—correct his story if it's wrong—you charged Falkenstein with sending to a German espionage address the specification of a proposed new tank."

"Falkenstein was not charged. I presume Dermor told you he was asked to explain a letter of his which . . ."

"I know, I know," Meon interrupted. "Dermor's people stopped a letter in the post one side written by him the other carrying a secret ink message. Why didn't you submit it to the department concerned?"

"My ghost!" A moan came from Reggie.

"What's that?" Meon asked.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Dermor's is the department concerned," said Lomas.

"Dermor's department doesn't know anything about new design. The message should have been brought before the people who do."

"Are you denying the message contained information which had been entrusted to you?"

"Everything in the message was derived from specifications of which I had copies."

"Copies you had at Hartdean on the night of the raid."

"Certainly."

"Then Falkenstein, or someone else in your house that night, was able to make an opportunity for reading them?"

"Anyone who was provided with keys that would open my desk and dispatch case and took the risk of being caught in the study."

"Who's in your mind, Meon?" Reggie asked.

"No one, sir."

"Oh! And Lady Meon's mind? She thought some unauthorised person was in your study that night. And told you so, what? You said your papers had not been disturbed. I wonder. Someone was working a typewriter late. Who was that?"

"It's the first I've heard of it," Meon frowned. "What put it into your head?"

Reggie smiled. "Bits and pieces. From various sources."

"Anyone may have been typing. Men carry their own machines nowadays. I hate the damned things. This gets us nowhere. The secret ink message wasn't typed."

"Oh, no, no. Typewriter used for speed so specification could be put back in study before you came home. Secret ink message written at leisure."

"I tell you there's no one in the house I suspect. As for the message. I wish to God it had gone through to the German espionage centre."

"What?" Lomas exclaimed.

"Why the deuce can't you security men co-operate with people who know? If you and Dermor had consulted the proper department the message would have been in Berlin by now, and given German production one of the worst headaches of the war. We're not building that damned design. It isn't a job, it's a nightmare. All very fine on paper, but hopeless to produce in quantity, and it wouldn't be through its teething troubles by the next war. Some of the soldiers were keen I should rush it experimentally, but I've made 'em see sense, and shut down on it. We have better tanks coming forward than that will ever be."

Reggie contemplated him with a dreamy smile. "Is General Dermor aware of your intention to make this statement to me?" Lomas asked.

"My God! Aren't you on speaking terms?" Meon retorted. "Ring him up."

"One moment," Reggie murmured. "Meon, who did send the secret ink message?"

"How the devil should I know?"

"I wonder. Sent on Hartdean paper by someone who had knowledge of the plans. Falkenstein told us he hadn't. Do you confirm that?"

Meon took time to answer. "Falkenstein has always been straight in dealing with me. Design is not his business."

"Does he know enough about it to spot this design was no good?"

Again Meon hesitated. "That I couldn't say . . ." Another pause. "He might see the production difficulties."

"So it's not very likely he sent the specification to a German espionage merchant."

"I told you I suspect no one."

"Yet after Falkenstein had been asked about the message, someone shot him. What's your explanation of the shot?"

"I don't know how he was shot. That's a matter for the police."

"As you say. But you do know Norton and Miss Buckland say he called them and they found him shot?"

"Certainly I know that. It explains nothing."

"You may be right. About Norton. Had you shown him the plans?"

"Norton worked on the plans before they were put up to me. He's my liaison with the soldiers. He thought the design was a win-the-war miracle, but I told him I wouldn't touch it, and he knew what I say goes."

"Oh! You clear Norton?"

"Absolutely."

"Fact remains someone sent particulars of dud tank to German spy centre on letter Falkenstein wrote at Hartdean. Not Norton, you say. Probably not Falkenstein, you suggest, 'Then who?'"

"I've told you again and again no one at Hartdean can be suspected."

"You have, yes. Curious and interestin' problem."

Meon stood up. "Evidently the information was obtained and the message written on the back of Falkenstein's letter by some rascal working from outside my place."

"You think so?" Reggie murmured.

Meon did not answer. He told Lomas: "The next time you attempt to handle matters of national importance take instructions from the department concerned." He went out.

"My Lomas!" Reggie purred sympathy. "Catch his clear accents, learn his great language. Give the Right Reverend General Dermor gyp. Why are departments? So one shouldn't trust another. And big business get away with it every time."

CHAPTER XXVII

AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE

HAVING sufficiently enjoyed one side of telephonic recriminations between Lomas and Dermor, Reggie stopped them by the remark that Rosen ought to be there.

Rosen lounged in with a sarcastic: "I hope I don't intrude."

"Sorry you've been kept waiting," Lomas apologised.

"My dear chap! There's a war on," said Reggie. "Departmental war. Hell hath no fury like officials scorned." He proceeded to relate Meon's account of the tank plans.

Rosen listened, and watched Lomas with respectful gravity till the end, then burst out laughing. "I hand it to Meon. He sure had you cold, Lomas. What does the general feel like?"

"Confound him," said Lomas. "If he'd only . . ."

"No, not again," Reggie moaned. "Had all that from Meon. Snark was a boojum. Plans were dud. However. Still have to hunt the snark."

"I don't know the language," Rosen grinned.

"My error. Fable by the *Alice in Wonderland* genius. Hunting the snark. There is a real snark. Plans taken from Meon's desk and summarised in secret ink message on Falkenstein's letter worse than useless to the enemy. Did sender know that? Not likely. Sender knew German espionage address. Sender workin' for Germany. Was the sender Falkenstein or someone else? Meon swore he didn't suspect anyone. Able fellow, Meon. I underrated him. Never again. I should say he does not suspect who sent the message, he knows, and is all out to cover the criminal."

"Why? What motive?" Lomas asked.

"Could be affection, family tie, some hold on him."

"Look at here," said Rosen. "What about Falkenstein's story now? He told us the letter was faked so we'd frame him as a spy. The way things have been turned round, I wouldn't put it past Meon he planned the fake to smash Falkenstein. Meon's on the side of your official crowd, he'd have no trouble fixing a letter would be stopped."

"But what motive has he for ruining Falkenstein?" Lomas asked.

"Say Falkenstein got wise to dirty work of his, and looked like giving him away on our side or yours."

"That's mere speculation, like Fortune's various theories."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Falkenstein may throw some light some day. Or Roget." He sank down in his chair smiling at Rosen. "But you haven't yet found the elusive Roget."

"I have not. This is your country, not mine."

"Too modest. As things are. However. Our Mr. Underwood has done you proud." Reggie recounted the tracking of Roget . . .

"Oh, Underwood's good," Rosen chuckled. "I allow you grow the men, let your system be what it may. If you don't object to my co-operation, how can I make contact with him?"

"We'll arrange a meeting," Lomas answered.

"Thanks a lot. Well now, indolent as I am, Fortune, I have a little contribution for the common pool. It looks bigger than I

reckoned after old man Meon's story, but you shall tell me the size of it. You've heard me mention Al Jeffs—Colonel Jeffs, Lomas, United States Army Intelligence, Raddonshire area. He has been working on that Raster lunch party Miss Buckland attended just before the Basdon officers' murder and the American-Canuck riot at Chilcote. There was difficulty fixing the boys she'd picked up. The story they tell is they knew her slightly, having met her running round with Norton, Norton asked them to lunch at the Raster hotel that day; when they got there they found her alone, and she explained Norton couldn't make it, he'd been called to London. She handed them tips from him they should watch out for trouble with the Canucks, he had reports of bad feeling all around, and she told them herself Radbury people were bitter about the raid, and saying Canucks blamed the doughboys for fire raising."

"The deuce of a story," said Lomas.

"The helpful Toll," said Reggie.

"Why do you cast back to him?" Rosen asked.

"Margot gave them the sort of stuff he told me she was giving 'em."

"It rings true, at that."

"Yes, I think so. Indicates Margot and Norton made the Americans hot and bothered over the Canadians. From the highest motives or the lowest. Yes. I fear Toll did tell the truth. However. More things true than are told. Anything from Colonel Jeffs on Mrs. Denlan's party with Canadians at Chilcote?"

"What a hope! American intelligence don't have facilities in the Canuck camp these days."

"Too bad. Well. We have something new on Toll. Roget, if it was Roget, went to a house with Swedish and Spanish occupants. Sort of place Toll would pick—and of our suspects only Toll."

"Aha. I'd call that a may-be."

"Quite," said Lomas. "But we take no chances, Rosen."

"So? Then what's the matter with raiding this dago Swede house right now?"

"We're not certain Roget's there. We are certain he means to fetch his teeth from the dentist to-morrow. If we raided the house, he might be somewhere else, but he'd hear we were on his track, and bolt again. The dentist is a safe bet."

"Safety first," Rosen grinned. "All right. I'll be seeing Underwood before to-morrow, won't I? I want to assist at the dental show-down."

"I hoped you would," said Lomas.

"While they fix it up," Reggie murmured, "might have another look round Falkenstein's rooms."

"If you say so," Rosen agreed.

"What is this, Reginald?" Lomas asked.

"Didn't make sense of things last night. Try again."

CHAPTER XXVIII

PROBLEM OF THE DOOR

INSPECTOR SACDON went with them, and on the way answered many questions.

The porter of Gave's Hotel was certain no one had called to see Falkenstein till Mr. Rosen came. That only meant the porter hadn't had an enquiry about him. Anyone respectable could walk in and go upstairs unchallenged, as Major Norton and Miss Buckland did. The porter failed to notice them. So the only time-fix was from Sergeant Mardale outside in the street. He said Falkenstein arrived close on four, straight from the Yard. A number of people came to the hotel, and came out between then and six-fifteen, when Mr. Rosen arrived, but they were all ordinary good class, he wouldn't be able to identify any of them. The only one who behaved peculiar was Mr. Rosen, taking a good hard look at him. Then almost at once after Mr. Rosen went in a man hurried out.

"The hell you say!" Rosen exploded. "No man passed me."

Sacdon never supposed Mr. Rosen came across him. Actually Mardale saw enough of the man to be sure he was much smaller than Falkenstein, and looked the regular Gave's Hotel type that had been in and out all the afternoon. Nothing could be made of it, though Mardale did right to report.

"Why didn't he get a close up of the guy?" Rosen demanded.

"My Rosen!" Reggie protested. "Couldn't run after an unknown. Instructions to stand by for Falkenstein. And he stood. Keeping his eyes open. Not without result. Someone left in a hurry while you were doin' your stuff upstairs. Previous to that, Sacdon—did any of the hotel residents or servants hear anything from Falkenstein's rooms?"

Sacdon had nothing very hard. Nobody heard shots. Several thought Falkenstein's wireless was on for a time, but couldn't say

when it began nor when it stopped. None of the page boys remembered taking a visitor up except Mr. Rosen, but the lifts were automatic, and anyone who knew the place wouldn't have a boy, Major Norton and Miss Buckland didn't.

"Nor will we, this time," said Reggie, as their car stopped at the hotel. The porter bestowed a welcoming, vacuous glance on visitors so sure of themselves they ignored him. They went up to the third floor.

Sacdon unlocked the door of 11B and shut it behind them, and asked Reggie: "Now what can I do for you, Mr. Fortune?"

Reggie gazed dreamily round the hall, an exiguous space. "Fundamental problem is the open door," he murmured. "Where did you get the key?"

"From the hotel office. They have duplicates to every suite for the servants. No master keys here."

"May I look? Oh, yes. Yale pattern, English made. Falkenstein had one like it on his key ring. No difficulty about cuttin' another from it, what?"

"None at all."

"An expert wouldn't need a key cut for him," said Rosen. "He could turn that lock by blowing on it."

"Expert crook. I wonder. Our Roget was in London yesterday."

"You've got to that?" Rosen grinned. "Go on. The guy who left hurriedly on my arrival was smaller than Falkenstein. Roget is half a foot shorter."

"So are most men, or smaller still. Fundamental problem not how door was opened, but why it was left open." Reggie surveyed again the scanty dimensions of the hall, which had more length than breadth to provide for a lavatory and a room on one side, two on the other, as well as the sitting-room opposite the outer door.

"We have only Major Norton and Miss Buckland's word for it they found the door open when they came," said Sacdon.

"Statement does require testin'," Reggie answered. "Let's try. I am the unknown hypothetical gunman. You fellows are Miss Buckland and Norton. You go off to the lift, count sixty, then act as they stated they did." He opened the door, ushered the pair out and shut himself in.

"Mr. Fortune's full of fancies," said Sacdon.

"Is that so?" said Rosen. They reached the lift, Rosen counted sixty, they turned, and as they turned saw the door open. They walked back and entered the hall. Reggie was not there. They

went through the hall and to the room in which Falkenstein had been shot. "Now we talk," said Rosen. "Norton and the girl were talking as I came along. Speak a piece, inspector."

"What the hell!" It was Reggie who spoke, spoke from behind them. "I am Waldo Rosen of the United States service." He dropped the imitation of Rosen to continue in his natural voice: "Well? am I wrong?"

"You win," said Rosen. "How did you work?"

"On the hypothesis the gunman opened the door to let himself out, and saw two young things approaching it. Didn't dare face 'em. Hid behind the door or slid into the lavatory, which was my pick. So they found the door open and went on through the hall to the big room. Same like you. Then the gunman bolted—hurried out of the hotel, as seen by Sergeant Mardale."

Sacdon breathed hard. "If I may say so, it's a very ingenious explanation, Mr. Fortune. We can't prove it, but it does account for the open door, which there was no means of doing, and for the statements of Miss Buckland and Major Norton. I should like to inform Mr. Lomas at once unless you want me further."

"Oh, no, no. Finished here, thanks. And you, Rosen?"

"Sure."

"Come on then." When they were out in the street Reggie asked: "All right?"

"You're all right. I'm sore the gunman got past me. By you, he must have been here in the hotel absolutely under my long nose. Let it go. Look at how we stand now. We had a good working line he was Roget. That's died on us. You said the gunman didn't dare face the young folks, and I'm with you. But Roget wouldn't give a damn for 'em, he would have come out and slammed the door and pushed past 'em, leaving 'em to ring while he made his getaway. The gunman was some guy known to Norton and Miss Buckland."

"Point well taken. Yes. He recognised them. He thought they would recognise him. Possible Roget has met them before, but unlikely. So what? Gunman is someone in the Meon circle much smaller than Falkenstein. They all are. Especially Meon."

"Meon? By jake!" Rosen grinned. "The more you hear from him, the less you believe. Well, I wasn't thinking a lot of his last stunt myself. Too fierce."

"As you say. Main fact of stunt, tank specification would only let Germans down, verified and admitted by the reluctant Dermor. Still our Meon was not tellin' the whole truth. Sufferin' from alarm we'd find out more if we tried."

"It looks that way," said Rosen.

"Yes. Nasty skeleton in the Meon cupboard. However. Musn't neglect others of his crowd. The helpful Toll tied up Falkenstein and Margot with the Basdon crime, and the rickyard fire, and Toll is a smaller size than Falkenstein. So is Launay. Though they're both bigger than Meon. There is also the possibility gunman was not a man. Woman in man's clothes would not be up to Falkenstein's height or weight. When you saw the pistol you said it was a woman's gun."

"I have not forgotten." Rosen's sombre eyes gleamed. "Who's the woman in your mind?"

"Margot excluded—Lady Meon and Mrs. Denlan remain. Don't pretend to understand Lady Meon. There's no love lost between her and either of the others. I should say she had little use for Falkenstein. I doubt if she'd take the trouble to shoot him, or anyone else, but she might for comfort. Mrs. Denlan is on the make, has a dubious past, and a suspicious present, may have been concerned in takin' the papers from Meon's desk, probably typed a copy from which the secret ink message was written. Would she shoot? I wonder."

"Come along to my quarters," said Rosen.

CHAPTER XXIX

CABLE FROM WASHINGTON

He was quartered in one of the big houses of Mayfair. He brought Reggie to a room with the decorations of a boudoir and steel office furniture. "What'll you drink? Whisky, cocktail?"

"No, thanks, no."

"Too bad. I ought to have tea. Excuse." Rosen left him, was gone some time, and ultimately brought back not tea but a sheet of paper. "They hadn't finished decoding," he explained. "I cabled Washington about the gun, you know. This is the answer. The Philip organisation report their .22 pistol D.7395 was in a consignment sent to Bell & Vacher, Minneapolis, October, 1938. Bell and Vacher sold it from their Duluth store, August, 1939. The clerk has no recollection of the purchaser. He wouldn't have so long after. Still, there is the hard fact the pistol was bought in America when things were boiling up to the start of your war with the Germans."

"As you say. Big place, America. Teach me some geography. Where is Duluth?"

"Minnesota, on Lake Superior."

"Long way from New York, what? Off Roget's beat."

"I don't see Roget going to Duluth for a pistol, or any other purpose."

"And Falkenstein?"

"He may have passed through some time. It's not his style to stop there."

"What kind of town?"

"Lake port, freight centre, lumber and steel. About a hundred thousand people; many Swedes."

"Oh! The helpful Toll."

"You're quick. I hadn't thought of that one. I like it."

"No American flavour to Toll. He's cosmopolitan, with a strong dash of French, natural or affected."

"Aha. I'm not a Swede expert. You'd hear some French accent in Duluth, French Canadian."

"Well, well. Is Duluth close to Canada?"

"Sure. Didn't I tell you it's at the end of Lake Superior, right next the Canadian frontier?"

"How far from Winnipeg?"

"Say four hundred miles."

"Eight hours. Curious and interesting. Mrs. Denlan said she lived in Winnipeg."

"At what date?"

"Before she met her husband. Which means before 1938. Also after his death—he died June, 1939—till summer, 1941, when, on Meon's instructions, she brought Tony to England."

"So, by her own account she was in Winnipeg during August, '39, the month the pistol was bought in Duluth."

"When Denlan crashed, June, '39, she was living near Edmonton. Date she moved to Winnipeg, one of many points her account left vague. More information about Mrs. Denlan a felt want. Hope the Canadian police will come through soon."

"They'll get all that's extant their side. On this Duluth clue it's possible some of her past is American. A woman living in Winnipeg with a baby wouldn't go to Duluth for the trip. What about her being American born?"

"Could be. Conspicuous absence of any accent. Talks English as if she'd had to learn it, and learnt precisely. Same like all sorts who have come up in the world, American, Canadian, English and others. Husband was American born and bred, though at a

Canadian university, and she met him in Canada—if she told the truth. Bafflin' problem. Many Swedes in Duluth, you said, and the helpful Toll is a Swede. She might be too. You mentioned French Canadians there. Do Canadians use Duluth much?"

"Quite a lot."

"Toll's companion of the raid night, Launay, is a Canadian, and, from the name, French."

"Likely he is, by origin, but you can't argue from names. There's nothing of the German about Max Falkenstein but his name. I've never met Launay. He is Canadian all right. Has he any French hangover?"

"Not the slightest. More like good old English gentleman. Still, might cable your people—can they trace Toll, Launay and Mrs. Denlan, née Avicé Lisle, in Duluth, August, '39, or any time?"

"What a hope! Well, I'll try it. Give me descriptions."

Reggie wrote three half sheets.

"Fine!" Rosen grinned. "Picturesque, realistic, R. Fortune inv. et del., to the life. But don't you wish you may get 'em, this late along."

Reggie went home, took down the index of the Cambridge Modern History and discovered one Johan Kristoffer Toll who bluffed hard in the Swedish revolution of the eighteenth century; another Toll who helped the Russians fight Napoleon in 1812.

"Enterprisin' folks," he murmured. "Bluffed hard is right."

He continued his studies, and found that the Cambridge historians knew of more Launays than the *Encyclopédie Larousse*: of a de la Haye de Launay whom Frederick the Great appointed chief of the Prussian customs and excise. "Mind goin'," he moaned. "I forgot. Man in Carlyle," and took down Carlyle's *Frederick*, and found the half-remembered de Launay, twenty-two years an unloved Prussian official 'of judicious ways, of no small intelligence, prudence, and of very great skill in administering business.'

"I wonder," he murmured.

CHAPTER XXX

LETTER FROM SWEDEN

HE rang up Lomas, and was asked to hold on. Some time passed before an impatient voice spoke. "Is that you, Reginald? Lomas here. What do you want?"

"Any report from the Canadian police on Mrs. Denlan?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Ask 'em for everything they know about Launay. Was he born in Canada, has he lived there his whole life, has he connections with Mrs. Denlan, Edmonton, Winnipeg or Duluth. Which is in America. Perhaps you didn't know that. I didn't till Rosen told me."

"What the deuce are you after?"

"Owner of pistol which shot Falkenstein. It was bought in Duluth while Mrs. Denlan, accordin' to herself, was in Winnipeg."

"How on earth can Launay be connected with her and the pistol?"

"Question for the Canadian police. Reason for question, two centuries ago Frenchman called Launay was a high up Prussian official. Which you didn't remember. Nor did I. Mind not what it used to be."

"Two centuries!" Lomas sneered. "Because a Launay went into the Prussian service then, you imagine our Launay is a German agent? It's fantastic."

"Oh, no. No. Prussian tradition devilish strong. Our Launay may be pure French Canadian. Mind open. However. Realise the possibility he isn't, and try it out. Another question for Canadian police. Launay's friend, the helpful Toll."

"Good gad!" Lomas exclaimed. "What have you got on him?"

"Remember he blackguarded Falkenstein and Margot to me."

"Do you suspect he's German?"

"Might be Germanised, though Swede. It happens. Rosen says there is a Swedish colony in Duluth, the place pistol came from. Rosen has set the Americans to work on that. Ask the Canadian police if they can trace any contact between Toll and Mrs. Denlan at Winnipeg, Edmonton, or elsewhere, not excludin' possible German agents."

"I never thought you would come to this, Reginald," said Lomas. "Can you bear finding yourself in agreement with Dermor?"

"Agreement with everybody on everything, my ideal."

"Then you had better meet him. He was phoning when you rang up. He'll be here in half an hour."

"Me, too. If you'll cable Canada at once."

Part of the half hour Reggie gave to conversation with Sir George Masledon, the surgeon who operated on Falkenstein. Nevertheless he was with Lomas at the appointed time, and asking: "Why? What's hit Dermor?" when Dermor glided in.

"The general has found another letter." Lomas gave them both a quizzing smile. "You will be glad to hear, Dermor, Fortune is of your opinion."

Dermor's ecclesiastical austerity was undisturbed. "You are facetious," he rebuked Lomas. "I value Mr. Fortune's opinion on any matter within his experience. Let us proceed." As if it was a sacred ritual, he unlocked a dispatch case and took out papers. "Are you acquainted with the Swedish language, Mr. Fortune?"

"Not one of my accomplishments," Reggie sighed.

"I must confess I have only a slight knowledge. I understand Lomas has none at all. The first document before us is written in Swedish. It was referred to my department by the postal censors, whose intelligent work deserves praise. You will observe that it was posted in Stockholm addressed to Mr. Gustav Toll, 23 Ligonier Court, London. The second document is an exact translation, you may depend upon that, it was made by my own department." He put the written letter and a sheet of typescript on Lomas's desk.

Reggie leaned over to read.

" 'GUSTAV,

" 'You told me I need not fear. You promised me you would save him, he would come back to me in the end. You have cheated me. You have lied. This day I hear from Bruno Larson, Ulric is dead, my Ulric.

" 'He was yours, you said, you laughed, when we were married, but you lent him me for life, and to tell you if he was not faithful. You were so merry, so kind, do I remember now! Faithful, my God! When he thought he must go and fight the Germans in Norway I wrote to you, I said he was not faithful. God forgive me! My hero! I said you must stop him, you must make him stay with me, he would listen to you, his dear, brave friend. And you, you did nothing, you wrote we should be miserable both if he did not obey his spirit. That was worse than nothing. You encouraged him he should go.

" 'Ah, yes, then after the Germans took him prisoner, then you brought me the news, and you swore you could find a way he should soon be free and come to me. How often have you told me those lies? Again and again you sent messages he was in Germany, he was in this camp an ' that camp, but you would arrange it he should come back to me safe, soon, soon.

" 'And now Bruno Larson has been to Germany for the Red Cross, and he has found out your lies. Ulric is dead. Ulric

died in August. Died! He was murdered, he was tortured to death. Three times he had tried to escape, and after the last time the Germans put him in one of their punishment camps. Do you know what that means, Gustav? Bruno would not tell me but I know, I know how Ulric died.

“‘ELEANORA.’”

“Damnable,” said Lomas.

Reggie’s round face was pale. He turned and looked into the fire.

“The style is somewhat hysterical,” Dermor told him. “But making due allowance for the manner in which women express themselves under emotion I have no doubt the story is substantially true.”

“World’s full of true stories like it,” said Reggie. “And women like her.”

“I sympathise with her,” Dermor went on. “Women bear the heavier burden. But on a broad view her case is providential.”

Reggie turned, blue eyes gleaming and angry. “Providential?” He was shrill. “Providence tortured her husband to death for our benefit? That’s devil worship.”

Dermor drew himself up, the authoritative ecclesiastic. “You speak with some confusion of thought, Mr. Fortune. It is in the order of things that out of evil good shall come, and by suffering and sacrifice alone right triumphs.”

“Yes, I believe in the devil. He is with power. Which gives no reason to believe he’s God. Contrariwise. Every reason to knock him out and stop the sufferin’ and the sacrifice.”

“I must . . .”

“Drop the theology,” Lomas interrupted. “What do you make of this letter, Dermor?”

“It gives us definite evidence Toll assured the lady he possessed influence in Germany which enabled him to obtain the release of prisoners of war.”

“Quite. This is evidence Toll’s a dirty dog. We can hold him and deport him. But what he said about having a pull in Germany is not evidence he had, or that he has ever been a German agent. If we charged him as such, his defence would be, first the lady misunderstood him, secondly, by her own statement, he took no action, or the Germans took no notice.”

Dermor leaned forward with an inquisitorial stare and asked: “Are you of opinion such a defence would persuade a jury he is not a German agent?”

"If I were on the jury, I shouldn't convict him," said Lomas.

Dermor drew back, sat erect. "For my own part," he announced, "I have very grave doubts that the evidence justifies a verdict of guilty. Therefore I cannot press for a prosecution."

"You're wise," said Lomas.

"Both of you off the point," said Reggie. "Which is—not whether you can convict the helpful Toll by the letter—of course you can't—but how you can get proof he's been workin' for the Germans."

"I am obliged for the advice, Mr. Fortune." Dermor condescended to sarcasm. "My department had realised the importance of proof, and will take advantage of every opportunity."

"Splendid. Usin' the letter?"

Dermor looked at him with the impatience of one who does not suffer fools gladly. "We were in agreement it is impossible to use the letter against him."

"Oh, no. No. Agreed letter won't convict him. Next step, use letter to get what will."

"I do not understand the suggestion."

"My dear chap! Let the helpful Toll receive letter by post in the ordinary way with opened by censor label. He's quite intelligent. He'll realise his talk of having a pull in Germany is now known to secret service wallahs—pardon—to the departments concerned. His reactions will be instructive."

"I never give suspected persons a chance of learning that I suspect them," Dermor spoke to freeze.

"Don't you?" Lomas smiled. "I've often found it make a kill."

"You're underratin' the helpful Toll, General," said Reggie cheerfully. "He saw an efficient secret service was bound to suspect him long ago. When he was at Hartdean the raid night. Hence his blackguardin' Falkenstein and Miss Buckland. The only thing he'll learn from the letter is you have information he's done dirty work and are playin' him till you're ready to strike."

"The argument is ingenious," said Dermor. "But there are risks in the course you propose which I can hardly accept."

"No risk at all. Toll's bein' watched by the police. He can't get away."

Dermor turned to Lomas. "That is a matter for you. Are you prepared to take the responsibility?"

Lomas laughed. "Stout fellow. I am."

"Very well. As I understand Fortune's proposal, he expects, and you agree with him, that the letter will frighten Toll into some

rash act proving him a German spy. But if the police keep him under observation he cannot commit any crime nor can he leave the country."

"My dear General!" Reggie sighed. "He can try. Expectation is he will."

"I do not follow," Dermor protested. "What do you expect him to try?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Reggie.

"Then you depend simply on incalculable chance?"

"Not me. Testin' probable hypothesis—letter will hit Toll where he lives."

Dermor turned again to Lomas. "You are in favour of this course?"

"Quite. It's by far the best move on the board."

For some minutes Dermor gave himself to silent, solemn thought. "As you have undertaken to prevent the man's escape," he said slowly, "I am willing you should make the attempt you desire. I leave the letter with you." He performed the rite of shutting and locking his dispatch case and rose. "Please report any new development at once." He glided out.

"Official answer on the day of judgment, my department wasn't responsible," Reggie murmured. "Yet he has a brain."

"He's a safety-first man," said Lomas. "There are worse kinds."

CHAPTER XXXI

FALKENSTEIN THINKS

ON the next morning Reggie visited Falkenstein. He lay in bed with a bandage over mouth and nose. "Here's Mr. Fortune, young fellow," said Masledon, the surgeon. "Lucky for you he found you. He saved your life."

Falkenstein's eyes were distrustful.

"Not me," Reggie assured him. "Beyond me. Only sent you to Masledon. Well. Someone made a clever effort at killin' you. Did you notice any taste in your whisky?" Reggie laid a writing pad and a pencil on the quilt.

Falkenstein pushed them away. His eyes, still unfriendly, had a puzzled look.

"You think not?" Reggie went on. "But someone played tricks with your whisky. What is the last thing you remember?"

Falkenstein lifted one hand to make a gesture of helplessness.

"My dear chap! Think. Somebody put chloral hydrate in the whisky you drank—powerful and swift narcotic. When you lost consciousness somebody shot you, and shot to kill. Can you think of somebody who wants you out of the way?"

Falkenstein's troubled eyes gave evidence that he was thinking. His hand announced he had thought to no purpose.

"Does anybody know your rooms well?"

A swift gesture rejected the question.

"Unless you let someone in yourself," said Reggie slowly, "the person who doped and shot you has a key to your door. Who's had a chance of getting that?"

Again Falkenstein raised his hand to protest ignorance.

"Major Norton and Miss Buckland were found in your room after you'd been shot. How did they get there?"

Falkenstein stirred, reached for pad and pencil, and wrote: "I rang Norton at office, could not get him, so rang Miss Buckland to tell him."

"Because you wanted a consultation with Norton over the Irish letter enquiry? But Meon was the man to consult on that business. Why didn't you ring him?"

Falkenstein wrote carefully: "Norton and I are intimate."

"You think Meon's not so good?"

Falkenstein let the pencil fall.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "The pistol with which you were shot was in your right hand when we found you and Miss Buckland and Norton. Unless you shot yourself somebody closed your hand on the pistol. It's an American make, not sold here. Only obtainable by somebody who has dealings with America. Can you think of anyone who has and who wants to eliminate you?"

Falkenstein's eyes betrayed that his thoughts hurt him.

"Someone in the Hartdean party?" Reggie asked. "When the Irish letter was made up and posted?"

With obvious reluctance Falkenstein took the pencil and wrote again: "I do not know. I heard Toll speaking to Meon about me. Toll has American contacts."

"What are they?"

The pencil wrote on: "Business with armament firms."

"Anything else strike you?"

Falkenstein laid the pencil down and looked at him anxiously.

"My dear chap!" Reggie smiled. "Don't worry. Done well. . . ."

He went off to Scotland Yard, and gave Lomas an account of this conversation. "Not a bad chap," he summed up. "For one of the white-bearded boy class. So keen to be right he tumbles over himself. I rather like him."

"He's no use," Lomas shrugged. "What you squeezed out of him doesn't amount to more than we had."

"Oh, yes. Confirms suspicion of Toll and Meon. Even the virtuous intellectual Falkenstein smelt something wrong with 'em. However. What Falkenstein smells isn't evidence. Any from Canada yet? Or Rosen?"

"There hasn't been time for an answer from Canada. Rosen's off on the Roget hunt with Underwood."

"Splendid. They might bring the beggar in any minute. Lunch while we may, what?"

CHAPTER XXXII

AT THE DENTIST'S

FOR a London November the morning was fine. Laurels and aucubas glistened under orange sunlight in front of the dentist's house, his brass plate on a gatepost shone.

The other houses of the wide, quiet road had each, like his, a patch of shrubs and a curving drive behind the shrubs from gate to gate, past porch and front door. Some windows were boarded, some on the ground floor protected from bombing by brick walls. Except for these war changes there was little difference between them, few signs that the occupants were any the worse for the war.

A car stopped in a side street, short of the road, but near enough to let the driver and his companion see both ways.

"You don't say!" Rosen grinned. "These respectable homes of the living dead look like the last place on earth Roget would pick."

"That's why," said Underwood.

"Good for you. But how would he know the place?"

"From people in that house let out for offices. Some of them are covering him, or we'd have picked him up there."

The local inspector came out of the dentist's, walked briskly to the side street, turned the corner, stopped by the car and said: "He hasn't arrived yet, nor phoned. I've arranged with Mr. Motter, the dentist, I'll wait for him inside the house. One of my men's among the shrubs, another handy."

"Nice work," said Rosen. Underwood nodded. The inspector went back to the dentist's.

A woman with a child followed him. At intervals of varied length, several people passed through the dental gates, none resembling Roget.

"Dentistry is not active," said Rosen. "Though it has the ever open door compared with the rest in the avenue."

The road was almost bare of traffic or any movement. One milk cart made its slow round. Here and there old women swept and cleaned and polished. A few women of all ages pushed home baskets on wheels laden with unwrapped food.

"War is hell," said Rosen. "How long would they stand in a queue before they filled their little go-carts?"

"You never know. That's the worst of it."

"I believe you," Rosen grinned. "I never aimed to be a woman, but why did I be a cop? This waiting till the guy you're after makes his break gets me down."

"It's all in the game," said Underwood.

"That's my complaint," said Rosen. . . .

The morning passed. Patients ceased to come to the dentist, the last woman had returned from the shops. Misty cloud spread over the sky and the sun dwindled to a red disc. . . .

"This looks like we've slipped up, brother," said Rosen.

"Don't you fret," said Underwood. "Roget's bound to come. He must have his teeth. . . ."

There was no more sheen on the laurels. The sky darkened, the shapes of the houses grew dim.

A taxi came along the road past the side street in which the car waited. It passed the dentist's gates, to stop a little way beyond, on the other side. A man jumped out, entered one of the gates there, and disappeared behind the shrubs.

"Good Lord!" Underwood exclaimed, starting his engine. "That bloke looks like Roget."

The man emerged from the gate, sprang into his taxi, giving the driver an order, and was driven away.

As Underwood made the turn into the road to follow the taxi turned out of it.

"I'm going after him," said Underwood. "If he isn't Roget, if Roget comes along later, leave that to the local men."

"You're right," said Rosen.

They swung round the turn which the taxi had taken, and saw it cross a main road with the luck of the traffic lights, which held them up.

Rosen swore. "He's heading for the office house," said Underwood. "Or is he? No. Kennington way."

The lights changed, they drove towards Kennington, and caught sight of the taxi again. It was moving away empty from the Oval tube station.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ADVENTURES OF SERGEANT MARDALE

FOR the third time that afternoon Reggie ended up in Lomas's biggest chair, opened his eyes at the buzz of the telephone. "Yes," said Lomas.

Underwood came in with Rosen, and gave silent questioning looks a sharp answer. "I've let the fellow slip through my fingers, sir."

Rosen drew up a chair to the fire, stretched his long legs, spoke out of the side of his mouth. "What the hell! These things have to happen."

Underwood told the story. . . .

"Damme," said Lomas. "You have no proof this fellow in the taxi was Roget."

"I beg your pardon, sir," Underwood retorted. "That's beyond doubt to my mind. First from his suspicious conduct. Secondly from what I saw of him. Thirdly from the facts Roget arranged to call for his teeth to-day, and had not called by six, when the dentist closes down."

"All very well," Lomas objected. "But you never were certain Roget was the fellow who ordered false teeth from this dentist."

"Oh, my Lomas!" Reggie sighed. "Practical certainty before. Fellow ordered denture same like found in rickyard and missin' from Roget's mouth. Evasive action by fellow to-day gives absolute certainty he was Roget."

"Sure," said Rosen. "And now we've lost him absolutely. Isn't that great? I allow I had no fault to find with Underwood's arrangements. I don't see how he could have done better. That won't alter the fact Roget has us beat."

"'Takin' one consideration with another, a policeman's life is not a happy one," Reggie murmured.

"You said it." Rosen eyed him gloomily.

"However. Study to improve. Usin' all facts. How do you account for Roget's proceedings this afternoon, Underwood?"

"I suppose he found out the police were watching for him at the office house, and made a getaway somehow. He wanted his teeth badly, but as the house was watched he suspected the dentist's might be. So he had his taxi pass it and stop the other side. He hopped out into one of the drives to have a look at the dentist's place, and spotted the men posted in the shrubbery and by the side. That's what made him bolt. Probably he'd fixed up beforehand where he'd go if he had to. If the luck had run our way I'd have got him. But when we came to the tube station he was underground, not a chance of tracing him. I took the taxi number, of course, and we can pull in the driver, but that won't help."

"Not likely, no," Reggie murmured, contemplating Underwood's gloom. "My dear chap! All points well taken by you. Except one. Unfair to yourself. You've put the wind up Roget. Chief operative of the German number one now desperate to save himself knowin' we can identify him by his teeth, whether he picks up a new set or not. That's goin' to cramp German number one's style. Best bit of work in the case yet. I should say . . ."

There was a knock on the door, and Sacdon entered, and told Lomas Mardale had something, and was told to send him up.

"Go on, Fortune." Rosen looked hard at him.

"I should say Underwood's work has been decisive," Reggie murmured.

"The hell you would!" Rosen's sombre eyes grew darker.

Sergeant Mardale came in, and Rosen turned and stared and grinned. "Here we are again, Sergeant. You gave me a smart once over outside Gave's Hotel."

"I thought it was the other way round, Mr. Rosen," Mardale answered, stood to attention before Lomas and at a nod talked fast.

His style, as droll glances between Reggie and Rosen remarked, was very different from Underwood's. No gloom, nothing apologetic about him nor anything of the sagacious caution and open-hearted homeliness with which Underwood faced the world.

Mardale could not be twenty years younger, but he looked all that, and talked to Lomas like a clever undergraduate to his tutor, like the junior and most accomplished subaltern to his colonel, not reporting but instructing, though kindly.

He took over observation on Gustav Toll's flat in Ligonier Court at eight o'clock that morning. The first post did not bring Toll any letters. About nine-fifteen a man went up to his flat, was let in, and stayed some twenty minutes, a man over middle size, respectably but shabbily dressed, of fair hair and complexion

and blue eyes. This fellow, from his general appearance and colouring, might well have been a Swede or a German. He evidently knew his way about the flats. On leaving he went towards Westminster Bridge.

A few minutes after ten Toll came out and walked in the same direction till he found a taxi. Mardale heard the address he gave, 19 Martello Road, Brixton.

Underwood looked at Rosen, but said nothing.

It did not, Mardale continued, take him long to find another taxi. In fact, he was on Toll's tail the whole way. Toll had played no trick over the address. He drove straight to it, a big, old house, let out as temporary offices for evacuated firms, some of them with foreign names; he went in and stayed till nearly half-past eleven. Mardale thought he went to more than one office, but in the circumstances could not make certain. He was back at his flat before twelve. A little later the second post arrived, and Toll received several letters.

There was some telephone ringing in the flat between then and one-thirty. Soon afterwards Toll came out again, and made a number of visits, in the City, for which he used the underground, and in the West End on foot. Mardale had noted every address. Though he couldn't be sure of all the people, some were foreigners, Swedes and Swiss. Toll did not spend much time with anyone, but he called on so many it was nearly five when he got back to the flat. He stayed only a minute or two, then went round to 21 Abbot Square, Westminster, and had some conversation with the manservant who opened the door. From the look of him as he went away, he wasn't pleased. He walked the streets for nearly an hour, tried the house again, and again had a longish talk on the doorstep. Then he returned to his flat, and was still inside when Mardale handed over to Sergeant Cark. On looking it up Mardale found that 21 Abbot Square was at present occupied by Mr. Frederic Launay, a Canadian.

"You've had a full day," said Lomas. "Carry on to-morrow."

Mardale smiled upon him, then on the other three, and departed.

"Won't that boy get swollen head from such praise?" Rosen grinned.

"He's going to be very good if he doesn't think so," said Lomas.

"I'd say he is now, though he knows it. But that's not British."

Solemn through this frivolity Underwood spoke. "He has opened things out, sir."

"Quite. We're all over the place now."

"Oh, yes, yes." Reggie uncurled himself. "'Wider still and wider shall our bounds be set,' though we have gone deeper we'll go deeper yet. First adventure of Sergeant Mardale—call of unknown large blond male, possible Swede or German, on Toll. Interestin' and suggestive, but obscure. No such person in the case previous. Second adventure—with Toll to the office house where Roget went. Toll's visit not reaction from Eleanora's letter, which he hadn't then received. Object, conference with people in the house. If the local police are right, Roget wasn't there. Several possibilities. Toll conferred with Swedish office people about him or on business lawful or otherwise. Third adventure—immediate reaction of Toll when the second post delivered the Eleanora letter. Much telephoning, followed by round of visits to neutrals, Swedes who might know Eleanora and her dead husband. Swiss who might know a thing or two about the inside of Germany. Not excludin' the possibility both kinds have German contacts which Toll employs. Shake up everyone on Mardale's list tomorrow and something definite might emerge. Fourth and final adventure—subsequent reaction of Toll. Efforts to see Launay which failed. Launay not at home, or wouldn't see him. And he went home in a bad temper. Hypothesis Eleanora letter would hit Toll hard justified by results to date. Reasonable probability we shall soon have more."

The moment this exposition ended Underwood protested: "I'm not clear about the results you mean. Toll didn't go to those offices Roget used because of the Swedish lady's letter. You said that yourself. What made him go?"

"Bafflin' question. At present."

"You've got too many pieces for your jig-saw, Fortune," Rosen grinned.

"As I see things," said Underwood, "they look as if Toll's mixed up with Roget, and went to arrange how he should dodge us and get clear. Look how that fits on to what we already had—Roget making for the Brixton office house by way of the cenotaph. We always thought someone picked him up there, and took him out to Brixton, and Toll, living so near the cenotaph, was a likely man. Now we have a Swedish or German-looking fellow at Toll's flat, and just after he'd been off Toll goes to the Brixton house. I think the fellow brought an S O S from Roget, the police were watching the house, he'd gone to ground some other place, Toll must arrange a clean getaway."

"Yes. Complete with teeth. Yes," Reggie murmured. "All that does fit every known fact. Roget must have had assistance to

play the taxi game at the dentist's and the tube so well. The helpful Toll."

"Underwood's gone big," Rosen grinned. "I'm for him. But we're short on evidence."

"We have no evidence against Toll worth a damn," said Lomas brusquely. "What about your great idea, Reginald? You expected the Swedish letter would scare Toll into a wild break away, out of the country or somewhere. It hasn't. You agree with Underwood he helped Roget escape. Then he came back home, read the letter, consulted people and decided to stay put."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Underwood's hypothesis ingenious and persuasive. Explains all facts now known. Others still to come. Which should provide the missin' evidence. Wait for it. However. As I was sayin', decisive action in the case probably taken this afternoon. By Underwood and Rosen at the dentist's when they chased Roget off without teeth." He stood up in sections, and gazed at Lomas's clock and moaned: "Help! I ought to be dinin' with two brothers-in-law." He fled.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FAST GOODS

As the late November dawn broke, a fast goods train drew up in sidings on the northern outskirts of London. The driver got down and walked round his engine. No light from the sky came through the steam and smoke overhead, but tall, shaded lamps sent down a diffused bluish glimmer. He saw something on the second of the engine's coupled left wheels and looked closer. The muck was red pulp. He gasped an oath, and spat and shouted to his fireman, and ran to the signal-box.

Reggie is of those who even in war are benign at breakfast. Even a dinner with two brothers-in-law, one an earnest bishop, one an ineffable civil servant, had not spoilt appetite or temper. He was quarrelling happily with his wife whether Cox's Orange or Ellison's Orange is the better apple, and about women and apples since Eden, till the arrival of Underwood disturbed him.

"My ghost!" he moaned, and went plaintive to his consulting-room.

They were, said Underwood, up against it. Mardale, going to relieve Cark at Toll's flat couldn't find him, and there hadn't

been a word from him. Phone calls to the flat got no reply. Toll disappeared without trace and Cark missing, bad enough, but worse had come in—a report on bits and pieces of a man run over by an L.M.S. train. From the size and clothes and so forth he was probably Cark. If Mr. Fortune could . . .

Within the next minute Reggie was being driven northward by Underwood, and delivering a rapid fire of questions.

The answers made an orderly narrative. It was just beginning to get light when the train stopped in the Willesden sidings. The driver and fireman hadn't seen a man on the line nor noticed any obstruction, but on looking at his engine the driver found flesh and blood mixed up with cloth shreds on one of the wheels. He was sure the wheels had nothing of the sort at Bletchley, the last stop. The railway people sent word down the line it must be examined. A little way inside a tunnel about twenty miles from London a man's body was found cut to pieces. The police had a job collecting them, and could only remove them in sacks, but were able to make out the man was middle-size, thick-set and muscular, black-brown hair, and wore dark grey clothes. That description showed a close resemblance to Cark.

The tunnel carried the up and down fast lines. It would have been quite dark outside when the goods train ran through. The railway people thought the man had fallen or been thrown from a passenger train. There were several up not long before the goods one down. The fragments of him were so scattered no one could say how and where and when his body had got on the up line.

It was near the London end of the tunnel they found the pieces. On the London side the lines were in a cutting through open country. A road bridge crossed them not far off. The local police said anyone could go down to the railway easily enough at any point of the cutting and bring a man's body down and put it on the line, but so far they hadn't found a trace of that being done.

"Only three definite facts," Reggie sighed. "First, durin' the night Cark disappeared. Second, this morning no one in Toll's flat answered telephone. Third, male body cut up by train in tunnel twenty miles from London a little earlier than dawn. Only one conclusion justified. Body reached the up line about that time. Couldn't be much before or another engine would have collected the mess of it. Conclusion which don't explain a thing. Inference from size, clothes and hair, dead man was Cark, reasonable by itself, and supported by mysterious vanishin' of Cark without a word and Toll goin' dumb. Points to murder, which is also suggested by fact body across the line where and when murderer

could make sure it would be smashed up without delay. But other facts, as the railway people said, suggest accident or suicide. Assume murder, assume he was Cark, and we have bafflin' problems. What took Cark twenty miles from London into open country? What had he found out that Toll or someone risked murderin' him? How did a smart detective knowin' he was on a secret job and mustn't show get murdered?"

"I can't tell you," said Underwood angrily. "Cark was as good as we have, believe me. These things happen."

"My dear chap!" Reggie sympathised, and asked no more questions. . . .

In the mortuary what had been found lay under a stained sheet, Reggie drew that back. Underwood gave one look and gulped and turned away.

"Not nice, no," Reggie murmured. Pieces of limbs, crushed body and head had been fitted together, leaving some gaps. "Divisional surgeon?" he asked the mortuary keeper.

"Yes, sir, the doctor fixed it, and went home to breakfast. I could phone if . . ."

"That's all right." Reggie opened an instrument case and examined and probed the faceless head . . . after a long time he put a tuft of hair from it in a box . . . the mangled body and severed limbs took even longer, though no one part received such minute study as the head . . . shred after shred of cloth he plucked from the flesh, inspected, discarded. . . . At last he found one which he did not reject, which, like the tuft of hair, he packed into a metal box.

"That being thus, that's all," he told the anxious, stubborn Underwood, replaced his instruments, washed his hands, put on coat and overcoat, swift but pensive. "Now we'll take the air. A felt want, what?"

Underwood strode out and made for the car.

"Oh, no. No. Not leavin' yet." Reggie stopped short in the yard. "Mortuary has a phone. Which I think you will also want."

"What for? What do you mean?"

"Dead man not Cark. If Cark's hair was black-brown by nature. Dead man's grew red. Dyed before he died. Moreover. What had been his face smashed to pulp. But previous state of upper jaw distinguishable. Front teeth pulled out long ago. Has Cark lost his?"

"No!" Underwood exclaimed, half incredulous, half exultant. "Good lord! Then this bloke is Roget!"

"Identity not established. Takin' the fact Roget's hair was red with the fact he'd lost his upper front teeth I should say the dentist's mould will make the identification complete. You do want the phone. Tell Lomas to tell Rosen."

Underwood ran.

Reggie made himself comfortable in the car, and smoked a pipe out before Underwood reappeared, looking pleased, but more surprised than ever. "Sorry I was so long, sir." He started the car with a shameful jerk. "You'd never guess what kept me."

"No, never do guess. Obvious probability—something about Cark."

"That's right. He's in hospital with a broken leg. Some Air Force chaps found him lying in a lane between King's Langley and Chesham. His story is he trailed Toll yesterday evening to Euston, and then to King's Langley and up over a long hill. It was nearly eight, and pitch dark, of course. Very few houses about. Cark didn't know where he was. Toll stopped at a cottage and knocked at the door, but no one answered, and after walking round the place Toll went back a bit and turned right to a little village with an inn. He had several drinks there, joining in talk all the time. Cark couldn't hear much, only mention of Londoners and weekends. From the inn Toll walked off a different way, but Cark has no doubt it brought him to the same cottage. He tried another knock and look round—no answer, all black. By that time it was near ten. Toll set a deuce of a pace, going, as far as Cark could make out, the way they'd come from King's Langley. Anyhow, they were in a narrow, winding line. The district is hilly, and all the by-roads are like that. Well, Cark says he wasn't actually in sight of Toll, but Toll couldn't have been far ahead, when he heard a car, and he don't remember anything more till he came to, lying in the ditch with pains all over, and couldn't stand up, only drag himself out of the water and wait for someone to come along. No one came till these Air Force boys after eight this morning, and by then Cark was pretty well all in with the chill and the pain."

"Too bad," Reggie sighed. "Anything been done about it?"

"Mardale's got busy and reported. Toll hasn't come back to his flat, but his servant is there, a daily man who arrived as usual at ten, having left last night at six, also as usual, and says Toll said nothing of going away, but often does without mentioning it."

"Well, well. No results from the King's Langley end?"

"Not yet. The men on duty at the station last night say several people caught the last trains up and down, but can't describe

anyone. It's likely Toll had time enough to catch either, and yet just as likely or more he went off in the car that knocked Cark out. The station staff say no one of Toll's description has been a regular passenger there."

"Though he knew his way in the dark to lonely cottage and remote village inn."

"If you ask me, we shall have the devil of a job tracing him from that. Cark don't know where the cottage was, nor the village, nor even what they look like. The only clues to 'em are, within an hour or so on foot from King's Langley station in the Chesham direction."

"My dear chap! Several other clues. Cottage not far from village inn. Cottage not occupied by ordinary country people, but resort of Londoner, week-ender. Dumbness of cottage and Toll's talk at inn combine to make that certain. However. Discoverin' cottage and occupier who wasn't there or wouldn't open the door might still be a long job. Other lines of enquiry. The car. Did it hit Cark in the back or front? Was it goin' towards King's Langley or towards the inn and cottage?"

"Cark thought it was in front of him, that is driving towards the cottage, but he only heard it, he never saw it, he can't be sure; you know how that happens with sound over a winding road. The medical report is he was struck sideways, which might happen with a car going either direction."

"Oh, my hat!" Reggie murmured. "Any report on road surface, tyre marks and so on?"

"Yes, the local police say a biggish car had skidded just the Chesham side of where Cark was found. That suggests the car was going from King's Langley towards the cottage, you see."

"I do. Also suggests the car passed Toll, or picked him up before runnin' Cark down. Supports interestin' and attractive theory Toll went off in the car. However. Avoid wishful thinkin'. Give full value to fact big car so driven it ran down alert detective sergeant in lonely region with Toll some eight hours before Roget was cut up by train fifteen miles away."

"I'm not sure what the value is," Underwood protested. "I don't see the connection."

"Far from clear," said Reggie, and shut his eyes.

CHAPTER XXXV

GREY PERSIAN

HE opened them in Regent's Park with a plaintive murmur. "Take me home."

"Won't you come straight to Mr. Lomas, sir?" Underwood was reproachful.

"Oh, no! No rash haste. Tell him all. After which I shall not be long. . . ."

He broke in upon a debate between Lomas and Rosen and Underwood. "By jake!" Rosen grinned. "Look who's here. Fortune walking fast. I didn't know he knew how."

"Any more, any fresh break?" Reggie demanded.

"Toll hasn't been traced yet," said Lomas.

"Mardale still watchin' his flat?"

"Of course. That's routine. Do you expect him to come back?"

"I wonder."

"What is the great idea, Fortune?" Rosen was impatient.

"My dear chap! Elimination of Roget arranged by chief German agent: who uses a cottage within an hour of King's Langley: who is Toll or well known to Toll: who, by himself or otherwise, took Roget out there last night, doped him, smashed his face so he would be unrecognisable, then drove the corpse over to the nearest L.M.S. tunnel and put it on the fast line so a train would cut it in pieces and account for its bein' faceless. Devilish clever. Same like all other operations in the case. With one difference. This was defensive. Hitherto enemy been attackin' continuous. Underwood said we were up against it now. I think not. Contrariwise. Case the other way over. We're so close on the German number one he had to kill his chief operative. Result of underestimatin' our capacity. And made that error once again last night. Didn't think we could tell from missin' front teeth and smooth gum deceased was Roget."

"Oh, you've gone big," said Rosen, but not without irony.

"How do you account for Roget's last hours?"

"I should say he dived into the tube sufferin' from bad funk. Change of hidin' place, disguise, dyed hair, clever precautions, havin' failed to put the police off. No doubt he made contact with number one at earliest possible moment. Who would not be

pleased, who realised things were gettin' too hot, his own number would be up unless Roget was wiped out good and quick, so under pretence of contrivin' an escape took Roget into the country by car and finished him—as I was sayin'."

"Fine," Rosen answered. "The only defect is you haven't any line on this number one."

"Oh, my Rosen! Your mistake. His mistake. Number one left traces, cottage, knowledge of countryside and so forth, from which we can find him and hang him."

"Use big maps," Rosen retorted, tapping one spread out on Lomas's desk. "Look at here. Between the place Cark was run down and King's Langley station there's the hell of a lot of lanes and cottages, and he don't know where he went. What a hope, combing 'em all out! Suppose in time you prove Toll used one of the cottages, you're still way off proving he killed Roget. Lomas could pull him in right now and give him the works, if he showed up. My guess is, he won't, but if he did you have nothing he couldn't bluff his way through."

"Think again. Every line has two ends. This led by cottage and lanes to end at disintegrated Roget. Began far off in time and place. Trace it back by dentist, cenotaph, Roget's Raddonshire murders, Radbury raid, rickyard fire, to Hartdean. I should say the other end is in the Hartdean party. Roget's false teeth knocked out by poor little conscientious objector over rickyard fire. Findin' of dead man's effects there started hunt which led to Roget bein' broken up by someone of the Meon crowd."

"You never guess, do you?" Rosen grinned.

"Not me, no. Stated practically certain inference from convergin' facts. Remember curious trlcks played in Meon's study over tank plans?"

"To frame Falkenstein? Sure. What about it?"

"Single hair of grey Persian cat on curtain. Other facts now converge." Reggie held out a metal box. "You see?"

"I do not. Where did you get this?"

"My dear chap! These. Extracted from the debris of Roget. Three hairs of grey Persian cat. No possible, probable shadow of doubt. Kept you fellows waitin' while I worked on 'em. Person who played tricks with plans was person engaged in killin' Roget. Person fond of cats. So am I. However. Inference certain though horrid."

"By jake!" Rosen burst out laughing.

"One of your longest shots, Reginald," said Lomas.

"Long, yes. Because we've been slow on the cat owner's

trail. Who has kept well ahead of us. Might now get closer. Ask Mardale if there are or were cats livin' with Toll."

Lomas shrugged. "We can ask. Mardale may find out."

"Not may, must. Send him a chit at once. More than time we raised the pace."

Lomas phoned instructions to Superintendent Hublet to instruct Mardale to enquire whether Toll kept cats.

"Fine," Rosen grinned. "The super and the sergeant will think we're crackers."

"Meanin' you think so?" Reggie enquired meekly. "Don't you try everything in America?"

"Everything that looks like anything. How can this cat stuff take shape? Say Mardale reports Toll's place is full of Persian cats, we won't be an inch nearer Toll. We won't even have any more worthwhile evidence against him. Mardale was watching his place from morning to night yesterday and . . ."

"Oh, no. No. Watchin' Toll. Durin' absences of Toll and Mardale from flat Roget could have entered. Subsequent, after Toll left followed by Cark, Roget could also have left flat and gone off to the car which finally deposited him dead in railway tunnel."

"So what your cat stuff pans out at is some fellow who was not Toll drove the car. We knew it before you went big on the cat's whiskers."

"Some person," Reggie corrected him. "Yes. Toll didn't do the whole job. Though he knew a thing or two about the doings. Was it in Toll's place or elsewhere cat hairs stuck to Roget's clothes? Important question. Answer will give us a line on Toll's relations with Roget."

"Will it? Say Toll does have cats, Roget could rub against a cat any old place. Say Toll does not, your line leads to any fellow who does—the same thing, which is nothing."

"Oh, my Rosen!" Reggie sighed. "Think again. Roget had to run for place chosen by his number one. Grey Persian cats rather rare. Sad but true. Why talk about fellows at large? More women than men fond of cats. Sex of car driver unknown. Broaden the mind—keepin' Meon's Hartdean party in full view. By one of 'em Persian cat hair was deposited."

Rosen's sombre eyes gleamed. "I've sure bought it," he said, and turned to Lomas. "You tell him."

CHAPTER XXXVI

MRS. DENLAN'S LIFE

LOMAS chuckled. "We have led you up the garden, Reginald. But you were so bent on going it seemed a shame to stop you. Thanks very much for the entertainment. Now let's see what we can do for you. A long Canadian cable came in this morning. It ought to have been decoded by now." He rang for it.

"Fancy that!" Reggie sighed. "Canada likes evidence. How different!"

Lomas's secretary laid typescript on his desk.

Mrs. James Denlan, maiden name Avice Lisle, the Canadian police reported, was born in Montreal, July 15, 1917, first and only child of father killed fighting in France, August, 1918, and mother who died November, 1934, leaving very little money. Avice came to Winnipeg for a job in the office of an air transport business, April, 1935. The business shut down, December, 1938, but a female stenographer who worked there had been traced, and stated Avice Lisle did not make friends much, girls or men, though attractive. She was very particular. August, 1938, she went for a holiday at Banff, and there met James Denlan, bush pilot working for an Alberta concern which operated from Edmonton. She married him that fall, in Edmonton, 26th October, and lived there with him. He crashed June, 1939, exact date and cause unknown, but she had a baby, Antony, born before, on June 7. She stayed on at Edmonton till the following March, and then moved back to Winnipeg. Reason given, the Edmonton winter did not suit baby. She had collected James Denlan's insurance of 5,000 dollars, but with that her capital did not amount to 10,000, and she settled down in a poor little shack just outside Winnipeg, and lived hard.

"I hand it to the Canadian cops," said Rosen, "they use the smallest tooth comb ever."

She had an occasional visitor, the report continued, female only. In the late summer of 1940 she left with baby, having asked the nearest neighbour to keep an eye on her shack and redirect letters Box 17, La Niche. That was a small town at the south end of the Lake of the Woods.

"The hell it is!" Rosen exclaimed. "Lake of the Woods is a

long hundred miles from Winnipeg on the way to Duluth, where the Falkenstein pistol was bought."

"Thanks so much," said Reggie.

Box 17, La Niche, the cable explained, took letters for a holiday cottage in the hills above the lake rented that summer by Miss Blanche Fersen, of Edmonton. September 15, she died, from bronchitis. The doctor who gave the death certificate recollected Mrs. Denlan telling him the bronchitis followed a severe chill. Miss Fersen had not strength to fight against it. Under the conditions, no help available, Mrs. Denlan did everything that could be done for her. Immediately after the funeral, September 19, Mrs. Denlan left for an unknown destination, telegraphing the Winnipeg neighbour to redirect letters poste restante Montreal. She also cabled 'Meon, Hartdean, Radbury, England' to write the same address. October 16 she collected letters at the Montreal post office. Her movements during the weeks between had not been traced. A Winnipeg house agent received instructions from her, September 25, to sell up the shack and contents. She brought baby to Montreal late October, having taken a first-class furnished flat, and stayed on till March 7, then sailed with him for England. The sudden change from poverty to comfort was accounted for by English remittances.

"Sudden is right," Reggie murmured.

Other questions, the Canadian police added, arose out of their enquiries. Miss Blanche Fersen lived at Edmonton during the period Mr. and Mrs. James Denlan were there, and was friendly with them. She did not have any job, and quitted the town after Denlan crashed. She was thought in Edmonton to be American, and well off in a small way, but her origin had not been traced. It was remarkable no relations showed up over her death and funeral. The female stenographer who worked with Avice Lisle in the Winnipeg office before marriage had kept some letters Avice wrote from Banff. Two mentioned Blanche Fersen showing her round, the third how she met a Mr. Denlan, a friend of Blanche's, the fourth announced her engagement, but said no more about Miss Fersen.

The stenographer and the Winnipeg neighbour both described Mrs. Denlan as a tall, large blonde, which did not agree with the Scotland Yard description. The La Niche doctor could not recollect her appearance. No one had been found at La Niche or Edmonton able to describe Miss Fersen. After receipt of Mrs. Denlan's telegram, redirect letters Montreal, the Winnipeg neighbour still kept an eye on her shack, as desired, and one day noted

photographs, books and small articles missing, though there was no sign anyone had broken in, and they were not valuable. She wrote Mrs. Denlan, Montreal, and got a telegram, Mrs. D. took the things to La Niche, which she did not understand, being sure Mrs. D. left them all in place. It would appear the things were removed secretly by Mrs. Denlan, or someone acting for her because they threw light on her relations with Miss Fersen. The circumstances of the death at La Niche must, therefore, be considered suspicious, and the Canadian police hoped they would receive photographs of Mrs. Denlan and any further information obtained immediately.

"Stout fellows." Lomas made a grimace. "Now where are we?"

"Sufferin' from a kick in the pants," Reggie sighed.

"Oh, they're good," said Rosen. "You hadn't thought of this one, Fortune. Or had you? Yep, look for the blots on Mrs. Denlan's past was one of your handouts. But did you expect this kind?"

"Expected obliteration of past in Canada as here. Photographs etcetera would disappear from Winnipeg shack as family photographs and personal stuff were absent from Chelsea flat, and life before marriage from conversation. Did not expect proof Mrs. Denlan had never been Mrs. Denlan. Mind open. Obvious possibility."

"Dammc, Reginald," Lomas exclaimed. "There's nothing like proof of that."

"Not proof, no. But strong ground for suspicion. Winnipeg women who knew the real Mrs. Denlan before and after marriage agree she was a tall, large blonde. Meon's Mrs. Denlan is short, thin and neither fair nor dark. The real Mrs. Denlan has never been seen by the Winnipeg women since she went to stay with Miss Blanche Fersen at La Niche. Photographs and personal odds and ends secretly removed from Winnipeg shack after Miss Fersen's sudden death. Circumstances suspicious, as the Canadian police have remarked. Indicatn' it was not Blanche Fersen who died but Mrs. Denlan. So Miss Fersen could take her name and year-old baby, join up with Meon, and have her cut of Meon's money."

Lomas made another protest. "You assume the Fersen woman murdered Mrs. Denlan, one dangerous risk, for the chance of impersonating her, which multiplied the dangers."

"Assume the Fersen arranged Mrs. Denlan, worn out and weak, should catch severe chill and not survive. Practically no risk of a murder charge. Subsequent impersonation—Meon had never

seen the real Mrs. Denlan, the Fersen knew Denlan well, and her husband, and needn't put a foot wrong, likeness of baby to the Meon family certified he was genuine, and that would go for sham mother, too."

"But Meon must have had letters from the real Mrs. Denlan."

"Probably had, yes. Though as she stuck out against bringing baby here she wouldn't write much. Easy for the Fersen to type in her style and imitate signature. Meon may have his doubts. Lady Meon has a lot. But he wants the child and the woman."

"You don't think much of Meon," Rosen grinned.

"You make the woman a fiend," said Lomas.

"The child," Reggie murmured. "She's been cruel to Tony. So he thinks life is like that. Not a nice woman. Used him ruthless. I should say she has personal reasons for hating him."

"How do you get that?" Rosen asked.

"Letters of real Mrs. Denlan from Banff. The Fersen showed her round, the Fersen was there when she arrived, the Fersen knew Denlan previous. Probable the Fersen's job in Edmonton, where she didn't have a job, was catching him so she could link up with Meon through him. She arranged a joint holiday at Banff, sure that would bring him to the point, and he fell for the tall, large, blonde Avice Lisle, of Winnipeg. Hell hath no fury like the Fersen kind of woman scorned. Also the marriage would be ruinous to the Fersen job. Denlan promptly crashed from unknown cause. Mrs. Denlan, staying with the Fersen, suddenly expired. And the Fersen became Mrs. Denlan, had the child of hated rival in her nice kind hands, had Meon where she wanted."

"I like it," said Rosen, "as far as it goes. Will it go on to the Fersen woman being the German number one?"

"It will not. Stops at certainty she works for him."

"Without any proof," Lomas shrugged.

"Fersen is a Swede name," said Rosen.

"What of it?" Lomas retorted. "Falkenstein's name is German, and that meant nothing."

"But the Fersen conceals hers," said Reggie. "Sore need to find Toll. Ring Hublet again."

Hublet said Mardale said there wasn't any cat in Toll's rooms, nor a trace of one, and Toll had not returned.

CHAPTER XXXVII

COMBINED OPERATIONS

REGGIE stood up, walked to the window, gazed out.

Rosen laughed. "Where's your cat line now?" And Lomas chuckled.

"Where it always was." Still gazing out, Reggie spoke in a voice of dreams. "Leadin' to Meon's Hartdean party. Thorough fellows, the Canadian police. But have not yet answered later questions—any contact between Toll and Mrs. Denlan, between Mrs. Denlan and Launay, and who is Launay, what is he, that he bobs up in the case continuous?"

"We only asked them the other day," said Lomas. "Give them time."

"My error we didn't ask at the start. My gross error. Can't afford to give time now."

"I told you before the idea of suspecting Launay was fantastic."

"You did, yes. Before Toll received Eleanora's letter which accused him of betrayin' a friend in German prison camp. On receipt he went twice to Launay's house, and then down to the district where Roget was bein' taken for murder. Don't tell me suspicion of Launay is fantastic now."

"There's no new fact to justify it. Toll has been on friendly terms with him ever since he came."

"Which he?"

"I mean Toll. He came over from Sweden early in '42. Launay's been here since the summer of '41."

"Oh! Well, well." Reggie turned, and contemplated Lomas vaguely. "Though you cannot suspect Launay, no possible objection to Underwood goin' round and askin' him about Toll."

"I had that in mind," said Lomas.

"Splendid. Need for Toll sorer and sorer every unforgivin' minute." Reggie directed vague, plaintive eyes at Rosen. "Might see if your Washington people have dug up anything on him," he said, went out and left the door open.

"Co-operative is my first name." Rosen gave Lomas a grin as he followed, but did not draw level with Reggie till they were beyond the gates of Scotland Yard. "Sir!" He fell into step. "At your orders. Like old man Lomas. I don't have to tell you there isn't a word from Washington. You know the American

end of Fersen and Toll and Launay, if they ever had any, will take the hell of a lot of finding. What's the great idea?"

"Combined operations," Reggie murmured, and drew him into a telephone box. "There goes Underwood. Takin' taxi. Good chap." He turned the pages of the telephone directory and found Launay's number, but did not dial it. "Abbot Square," he murmured. "Five minutes by taxi. Underwood almost there. Let us walk. Pleasant quarter of an hour."

"Are you aiming to butt in on him?"

"Oh, no, no. Wouldn't do a thing like that. Assist him by simultaneous operation."

Abbot Square is of churchyard quiet, its houses of grave elegance brought up-to-date. Underwood paid off his taxi, looked number 21 up and down, thought it had everything except a garage, and rang the bell.

The oldish man-servant who opened the door was like the house, solemn and pleasant. He read the official card which Underwood gave him, holding it at a distance, and, with respectful lack of interest, said he did not know whether Mr. Launay was at home, but he would see.

Put into a small back room superlatively neat and masculine, Underwood examined the leather chairs, the Turkey carpet for cat's hairs, and, to his rueful amusement, found none.

"If you please, sir." The grey butler led him upstairs to another back room of the same style, but spacious and more richly furnished. Gilt-bound books all over from floor to ceiling except where two pictures hung like sunlight. Sort of velvet, the carpet, royal blue. Some rare old period pieces. But everything just so. Precise to the limit.

And Launay. Neat as could be. Perfectly turned out. Pre-war standard. Pre-war? Edward VII! With that trim white beard, absolutely right. The manners too.

"Sit down, inspector. What is your business?" Sharp, exact way of speaking, with a friendly smile.

Underwood was sorry to trouble Mr. Launay, but had instructions concerning a gentleman living near, Mr. Gustav Toll. Did Mr. Launay know him?

"He is an old acquaintance."

"Where did you first meet him, sir?"

"I was introduced to him by Sir Thomas Meon some time ago. I cannot recall the place or the date."

"Have you met him frequently since?"

"Occasionally, as one does visiting the same houses."

"Am I right, you were both visiting Sir Thomas Meon, at Hartdean, the night of the Radbury raid?"

"Yes, Mr. Toll was there when I arrived. The visit was naturally cut short. I returned to London the next morning, but Mr. Toll did not accompany me. That visit was, I think, the last occasion on which we met."

"Yesterday evening, Mr. Toll . . ." Underwood began, but was interrupted by a telephone bell.

Launay lifted the receiver, listened, answered sharply: "Yes," rang off, told Underwood, "I shall not delay you," and went out . . .

"This will do," Reggie had said to Rosen as they came upon a telephone box near Abbot Square, taken him inside, dialled Launay's number and talked Cockney. "Is that Mr. Lorny? . . . Come awf it. Git 'im ter the bleedin' phone an' git 'im quick . . . Ah bin on the run with Elf Rojjet an' ah've 'ad a bloody ole time not 'arf I 'aven't, wot with thet stinker Toll muckin' us abaht, an' flet-feet all over the plice . . . Mr. Lorny? . . . Ah don't think. Ah'm Elf Rojjet's chum wot 'elped 'im through yer know wot, and 'elped him awf. Ah tell yer strite ah don't stand fer no funny stuff nah . . . Wot I want aht er yer is fifty quid in pahnd notes posted ter J. Smith, 43 Nutton Street, 'Oxton. If the oof don't come first post termorrer yer for it, guv'nor, see? Elf's blasted teeth let 'im dahn, and they're goin' ter let yer dahn yerself the minute ah tells the busies. . . . Nar then, nar then, none o' thet. Yer did the dirty on pore ole Elf, but yer can't do nuthink like thet with me. 'Oo said cats? Elf knoo a thing or twd. 'E got his 'cos 'e 'adn't no brines to use wot 'e knoo. Ah'm different, guv'nor. Pretty bit o' fluff, Miss Fersen, ain't she? Between yerself and Toll, a reg'lar Gawd 'elp us. First post, mind yer. Cheerio."

Reggie hung up, and turned his eyes, asking Rosen an unspoken question.

"Swell," Rosen grinned.

"Should assist Underwood," Reggie murmured, walked out of the box and looked towards Abbot Square, where no creature was visible. "However. Can't wait for it." He hurried the other way and caught a taxi. . . .

Left alone in Launay's library, Underwood made a round of examination, alert for any sound, saw no cat's hair, heard nothing, speculated whether the telephone call had come from outside or from the butler, whether Launay didn't want to answer in his hearing or had gone to meet someone. In vain examination and speculation, he lingered by the window and discovered the house

had an agreeable back garden, tiny stone walls made patterns on crazy paving, and dwarf shrubs and rock plants everywhere, trim climbers over a garage at the end. So Launay could keep his car handy.

Underwood heard him speak, though not what he said, slid away and sat down, and the moment Launay came back to his chair resumed the conversation as if it had not been interrupted: "Yesterday evening, Mr. Toll called at your house twice, sir. Were you aware of that?"

"No. I am surprised. But I was not here, I spent the evening at the club," Launay answered in a hurry, his tone sharper than ever, but careless.

"Can you tell me what his business was?"

"Mr. Toll has never had any business relations with me of any kind."

"Then why did he call on you twice after dark yesterday?"

"I am unable even to conjecture. As I told you, I know very little of Mr. Toll. We are on terms of mere acquaintanceship."

"What time did you get home last night?"

"Shortly after eleven."

"Did you go out again?"

"I did not." Launay rose.

Underwood sat still. "Have you any knowledge of a man called Alfred Roget?"

"None at all. Who is he?"

"He was a private in the American army at the date of the Radbury raid. He is dead. We have reason to believe he has been murdered."

"Indeed? I regret . . ." Launay made a gesture of dismissal.

"If I were able to assist you in any way I should be happy."

"Have you ever met anyone called Fersen?"

Launay's eyebrows went up in a stare of bewilderment. "The name is entirely strange to me. Is the man another American soldier?"

"She isn't a man," said Underwood. "This enquiry arises out of information from Canada."

"That increases my regret I cannot help you. I never encountered anyone of the name." Launay pressed a bell push. "There is an urgent conference at the Ministry of Supply which I must attend. Should you wish to consult me again do not hesitate, inspector."

"I'm much obliged," said Underwood, and the butler opened the door and ushered him downstairs and out. From the hall he

heard some faint squeaky noise. He made haste round the corner of the square to a point from which he could see both the front door and the garage doors at the back. Not far off a taxi had stopped. He made for it, but the flag was down, a passenger inside. The garage doors opened, a car came out, Launay driving. So Launay really had urgent business. But not at the Ministry of Supply. The car headed west. And the taxi started up, swung round and followed, the man inside leaning forward.

Underwood took the taxi number, and hurried on to find a telephone box and report it to Superintendent Hublet. Then he caught a passing taxi. . . .

The decrepit lift of Grandcourt House groaned up to the third floor and emitted Rosen and Reggie. Reggie rang Mrs. Denlan's bell, waited some time and rang again. "Aha!" said Rosen. At last the old woman, Mrs. Denlan's treasure, opened the door a little way and puffed: "Nah then! Wotcher keep ringing faw? Jer want me ter run my feet awf faw yer?"

"How do you do, Mrs. Chubb?" said Reggie. "How's Tony?"

"E's awright." Her suspicious eyes narrowed. "'Ere! Oo might yer be that yer askin'?"

"Mr. Fortune, you know. I've come to see Mrs. Denlan again."

"Ah dunno yer," she sniffed. "'S my b'lief meddum's aht."

"Tell Mrs. Denlan I'm here," said Reggie, walking into the hall. She gave him a watery glare and shuffled off.

Rosen gripped his arm and whispered. "Your phoney phone talk imitated her."

"What a thought!" Reggie smiled.

They were kept waiting some minutes. Then it was Mrs. Denlan who appeared at the end of the hall. "Why, Mr. Fortune!" She sped towards them, a little hand clasped his. "How kind of you!" She led them into the bright drawing-room.

"May I?" Reggie murmured. "American friend of mine, Mrs. Denlan, Mr. Waldo Rosen, knows your country."

Rosen bowed. "After my own, I don't know any better."

Her big brown eyes smiled at him, the gentle voice was sad. "I often wish to be there again."

"How's Tony?" Reggie asked.

"Dr. Sale is satisfied with him, Mr. Fortune, and he does seem stronger. Thank you so much. He is out with Isabel for his afternoon walk."

"On the 'bankment?"

She laughed. "He will say 'bankment. How you remember."

"Be back soon?"

"Yes, I expect them any minute. You chose your time well." She was arch, smiling, with lips as well as eyes. "Of course you came to see Tony, not me."

"Oh, no, no. Wanted a talk with you. When you were at Banff, you know, lady from Edmonton was there, Miss Fersen."

The pretty, pale face quivered and wrinkled, she leaned back in her chair gazing at Reggie, tears came in her big eyes. "Blanche Fersen," she said with a sob. "Poor Blanche, she was so kind, always and always. If you had known her, Mr. Fortune—but perhaps you've met someone . . ."

"I am in the United States service, madam," Rosen told her. "I have had a report on the death at La Niche. I want to know what you did with Blanche Fersen's personal effects."

"Did with them? What could I do? I gave them away."

"Is that so? And the personal effects of Mrs. Denlan?"

"What do you mean? I have them with me, of course."

"I do not mean the things Mrs. Denlan had with her at La Niche. I mean those she left behind in her Winnipeg shack. She did not return. Why wouldn't she?"

"I couldn't bear to. Everything had been so dreadful, and then poor Blanche's death. I simply couldn't go on any longer as I'd tried. I had to bring baby away from it all."

"Having come into money?"

She stared, her face distorted. "What?" she gasped. "Oh, how horrible! Sir Thomas Meon sent me money."

"To Montreal. How did you finance the long trip from La Niche? Why did you have Mrs. Denlan's personal effects removed secretly from her Winnipeg shack?"

"They were not. My personal things are here, I told you. Everything else was sold."

"Do you have a portrait of Mrs. Denlan's father or mother or any family article?"

"Of course I have." She ran out of the room.

Reggie went to the door, opened it again, and listened.

"She has her story," said Rosen, "she's not bolting."

"Didn't suppose she was," said Reggie, returning to his chair.

She came back, and showed Rosen a woman's gold watch, an old-fashioned half hunter, a ring of rubies and diamonds, an amber necklace. "These were my mother's."

"Aha! American," said Rosen. "And you do not have any photograph of her nor of father, nor of Blanche Fersen. But you can . . ."

He broke off, he turned as Reggie went to the door and stood by

it. Sounds of an altercation came from the hall. "Wotcher mean, phone?"—"You know very well."—"Ere, keep yer 'ands ter yerself."—"Where is your mistress?"—"In the droring-room. Awright, awright."

The door was flung open, and Reggie kept behind it.

Launay entered, dragging Mrs. Chubb with him, and asking fiercely: "Has this old woman been here all day?" while Mrs. Chubb snuffled: "Don't blime me, mum, ah done my best."

Her mistress, flushed and short of breath, said: "How ridiculous!" and laughed. "Show the gentleman into the dining-room."

Reggie spoke from behind the door. "Hallo, Launay. Fancy meetin' you here."

Launay swung round, confronted him, sleekness broken by passion, but managed to say: "I did not observe you, Fortune. I was not aware Mrs. Denlan had visitors." He looked hard at the lady.

"You needn't wait, Mrs. Chubb," said she, and when Mrs. Chubb had shuffled out the soft voice went on calmly: "Do you know Mr. Waldo Rosen, Mr. Launay? He is in the United States service."

They bowed, Launay ceremonious, Rosen formal.

"Was there some mistake over a telephone message, Mr. Launay?" the soft voice asked. "I am sure Mrs. Chubb did not ring you. She is a treasure, but I can't teach her to use the telephone. It frightens her."

"Me too," Reggie murmured.

"The good woman said something about the telephone which I could not understand," Launay smiled.

"You arrived at a good moment for me, sir," Rosen told him.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I am here on duty. Two American citizens have been murdered, and an attempt made to murder another."

"What, in England?" Launay exclaimed.

"Registering surprise don't get you any place. You knew Max Falkenstein. You knew him well."

"I have met him frequently. I understood from Meon he shot himself by accident, poor fellow."

"Falkenstein's recovering."

"I am much relieved to hear it."

"And we have his story. That is one reason we went after Blanche Fersen."

Throughout the ambiguous dialogue Rosen had been slow and stiff, with a bleak eye on the woman, Launay quick, careless,

ignoring her, she placid, looking her prettiest, Reggie remote by the door. The name of Fersen shook Launay's composure. She sat quite still, but her big eyes turned to him. He lit a cigarette and inhaled, and asked: "Who is the lady?"

"Well, how would you describe Miss Fersen?" Rosen grinned.

"I hear the name now for the first time."

"But the lady there does not." Rosen pointed at her.

A bell rang, and went on ringing.

"Blanche was my dearest friend, Mr. Launay," the soft voice informed him.

"Sure," Rosen said. "You proved that."

"I do not understand," Launay protested.

"Then pass on to Roget's murder and the murder of his buddy and the rest, Launay. We've just gotten the lay-out from her."

While he spoke the bell stopped ringing. There was a scuffling in the hall. Reggie opened the door, remaining behind it, and saw Mrs. Chubb thrust back by a thick-set man, muffled to the chin, hat over eyes, who rushed on into the room.

"At last I find you," he said, stopped short and looked from Launay and the woman to Rosen.

"That is so, yes," Reggie murmured, and for the second time in the case whistled ferocious Wagner—the Walküren Ritt.

The man swung round, he pulled off his hat, uncovered the blonde shock of hair, the dark, scarred features of Toll. He laughed. "I make you my compliments, Mr. Fortune. You have been more subtle than I."

"Wouldn't say that," Reggie answered, shutting the door, staying by it.

Launay had stood up.

"Why, Mr. Toll," the woman cried, "how do you do?"

"Thank you very much, madame. I am infinitely obliged to you." He was watching Launay with a fierce stare. "It is clear the high and well-born Herr understands that."

Launay swayed, scowled at the woman, whose big eyes turned from him to Reggie, he made a stride towards Toll muttering: "Are you mad?"

Rosen came between them. "No, sir, the mad one is you. We'll have the show-down right now, Toll."

"With great pleasure. This animal Launay, it is Boche, it is spy, saboteur, assassin, all that there is of Bochonnerie. But madame has no doubt informed you how he employed her. She was not the only one. Also, the dirty types that were pathfinders for

the Luftwaffe at Radbury and started the troop riots, they were his men."

"Absurd!" Launay exclaimed. "What men?"

"Der Herr has paid them off, Fortune," said Toll, "as he would have paid madame, if you had not been more quick than he in the end. She knows too much, like Roget. What became of his faithful Roget yesterday? Herr Launay was not at home last night in the exquisite Persian pavilion with the Persian cats that he loves. Have you seen him tease them, Fortune? No? It is the animal naked."

Launay jerked round to stare at Reggie, who showed not a sign of interest. Rosen chuckled.

"Never again with the cats, mein Herr," Toll's rasping voice grew deeper. "They escape alive. They are more happy than Ulric. Der Herr remembers Ulric? I, I also."

Launay began to speak, but flinched and failed.

"Where was der Herr last night?" Toll went on. "He was in his car driving Roget, miserable fool, out through the country. Bucks, is it not, which he knows well, he has a cottage. But only some minutes he stopped at the cottage, I could not catch him, I was on foot, he drove off towards Tring. This morning I hear there a man has been cut to pieces by the trains in the tunnel. Without doubt you have already ascertained the man was Roget."

"Sure," said Rosen.

"This—this is false, sir," Launay stammered. "The fellow accuses me because I would not assist him in communicating with Germany."

"It's a cinch," Rosen grinned, and dialled Scotland Yard. "Waldo Rosen speaking. Put me through to Mr. Lomas quick."

Reggie went out. The woman followed close.

"Rosen here, Lomas. Send some boys along to Mrs. Denlan, 65 Grandcourt House, Chelsea. We have the whole thing in the bag."

The woman's voice rose. "Oh, Mr. Fortune, I am so glad . . ."

Launay ran into the hall. She was holding Tony's hand, bending over him, and he between his nursemaid and her looked up at Reggie. "Isn't he sweet?" she said eagerly.

Launay flung her upon Reggie, and broke past them to the door, knocking the nursemaid down. Rosen strode after him, caught him. He swung round with a pistol in his hand. Rosen bent his wrist up as he fired. But before the shot Toll shot him. He sagged and fell, and screamed.

"Yes. It is in the stomach, Launay," said Toll. "You will suffer before you die. Remember Ulric."

"Give me that dam' gun." Rosen snatched it. "Have a look at Launay, Fortune."

"Oh, no, no. Not my job. Want Tony." Reggie picked him up and carried him to the door.

"Mr. Fortune," the woman cried. "Tony isn't hurt, is he? Don't take him away from me."

But Reggie and Tony were gone.

She tried to follow. "Stand fast, you," Rosen put his back against the door, "till the boys come along."

As he spoke Underwood came. "You're sharp on it, buddy," Rosen grinned. "But where's the squad?"

"My Lord!" Underwood muttered, looked from the prostrate, writhing, moaning Launay to Toll's fierce satisfaction, to the woman, patient in distress. "What have you been up to? Have you phoned?"

"Sure," said Rosen. "Your boys will be right round when they're dressed for it."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHAT TONY THOUGHT

IN the half light of the lift Tony said: "I remember you."

"We're friends," said Reggie.

"Yes, please," said Tony. "Where are we going?"

"Goin' to have tea with my wife."

"Oo!" said Tony. "Thank you."

Launay's car and Toll's taxi were drawn up outside the house. Reggie read the name on the car licence and smiled, and got in with Tony and drove off.

"Why did the men shoot?" Tony asked.

"They were cross."

"The man who fell down was Mr. Launay. I think he likes to hurt. Mamma always says not, and not be silly, but I think he did shoot at me for that."

"His mistake. He won't hurt anyone any more."

"Will he be dead?" Tony asked.

"He'll be put some place where he can't get out."

After a moment of solemn silence. "I'm glad," Tony decided. "I don't 'xactly want him dead. Who was the other man that shot?"

"Mr. Gustav Toll. Never seen him before?"

"I think he is the man who came to see mamma one day, and afterwards she kissed me good night. I think she didn't feel well."

"Let's go through the park," said Reggie, and diverted Tony's thoughts to dogs on the grass, and ducks on the Serpentine, and starlings on the tree tops. Tony was not at the end of the questions these subjects raised when they were in Reggie's house.

"But why doesn't starlings have tails?" he asked.

"I wonder. Let's see if my wife knows," said Reggie, and brought him to Mrs. Fortune. "Tony Denlan, Joan."

"Well! I have been hoping you would come." She held Tony's hand a moment, and while Reggie murmured French she explained: "Ever since I heard about your pictures."

"Why don't starlings have tails, Joan?" Reggie sighed. "You know everything. Tell us."

"Because they want to be funny, they're so kind."

Tony considered that. "They are funny," he agreed, but did not laugh. "They waddle-waddle." He gazed at Reggie. "Like you said. I think funny people mean to be kind."

"Where's this tea?" said Reggie, and went out, and Mrs. Fortune made Tony talk of anything but people till a maid told her tea was in the dining-room.

As they went downstairs: "Is all the house yours?" Tony asked.

"Yes, we're only two." She put her hand on the child's arm.

"I like it," said Tony. "Aunt Florence has a house. But mamma hasn't. Aunt Florence's is nice, but not so nice as this. I think mamma didn't like."

Across a table spread with a war-time nursery tea of ingenious variations Mrs. Fortune smiled at Reggie. "All my own work," said he. "I began on the scones."

"He is showing off, Tony," said Mrs. Fortune.

"I'm not." He passed the scones to Tony. "I had one before you came down. Or was it more?"

"Much more, I expect," said Mrs. Fortune. "He is always so hungry, Tony."

"Well, men are," Reggie protested. "I do go the bundle on my tea. What do you like best, old man?"

Tony wasn't sure, received suggestions politely, but without interest, shied at the more imaginative varieties offered, chose the plainest fare on the table, made a small meal. Yet he showed some interest in them, and at the end he said: "I never did have tea with people before. It's nice, thank you. Do I go back to mamma now?"

"Oh, no, no. You're stayin' with us for a bit," Reggie answered. "That's all fixed up. Come along to the study."

The prospect of absence from mamma, of remaining with them, gave Tony no concern. "Uncle Tom has a study," he answered. "But no one must ever go in."

"Mine is our play room," said Reggie.

Tony was taken there, and after general investigation of a number of things which have amused many children besides Reggie, found no delight in them, but he settled down with Mrs. Fortune to draw strange animals on cardboard, and cut them out and let her make them stand.

Unobserved by Tony, Reggie departed, and his absence remained unnoticed, unregretted.

After some time Mrs. Fortune saw that Tony had ceased his creative work, and was looking at her, puzzled and grave, but with approval. "I think you are like someone," he said. "I don't remember."

"Someone nice?" Mrs. Fortune asked.

"Yes, I think," said Tony. "It was ever so long ago."

CHAPTER XXXIX

LAUNAY'S ADVICE

REGGIE drove Launay's car to Abbot Square. A constable appeared from nowhere as he stopped and got out. "Watch it," said Reggie. Launay's door opened before he rang.

"Come in, please." A sharp voice spoke. "Beg pardon, Mr. Fortune. Inspector Underwood and Sergeant Mardale are upstairs."

Reggie went up, calling Underwood, who met him on the first floor and said: "Well, sir, Toll told the truth about one thing. You know, the exquisite Persian pavilion, and Launay keeping Persian cats there. Just come and look at this." He led Reggie through a door into perfumed gloom. "Where is the blessed switch?" he muttered. Light glowed from drapery all around.

"Oh, no! No!" Reggie moaned. "Not exquisite, not Persian, not pavilion." The room was hung with tapestries which hid its shape, and rose in curves to a central point so that it should resemble an Asiatic tent of *Arabian Nights* luxury. Pictorial rugs in bright sheeny colours were soft on the floor, one broad divan stood in the middle, with many cushions round, but cushions and divan were

plain black velvet, and the table steel and glass, the brazier beside it also of stainless steel, contained an electric fire. "Frightful!" Reggie shuddered. "German, all too German. Though he had taste he wanted this. To fancy himself a sheik, exotic superman or what not. Nasty creature. Toll knows a thing or two."

"Look at the cats," said Underwood. "One bolted when I opened the door, fairly shot out."

Two grey Persian cats lurked behind the divan. One slunk away as Reggie went towards them, the other put up its tail and spat, but cowered down and mewed miserably when he stroked it.

"Teased was an understatement by Toll," said Reggie. "Have 'em taken care of . . ."

Launay moved in his bed in hospital to peer after Lomas and Rosen as they left him.

Reggie sat curled up by Lomas's fire, smoking a pipe, eyes closed. He opened one to greet them and asked: "Well?"

"The surgeon guesses Launay will come through," Rosen answered.

"Splendid. Told Launay?"

"What sort of guys do you think we are?" Rosen grinned.

"No, Reginald, we did not tell him," said Lomas, "which led him to tell us a great deal."

"It would, yes. Well?"

"How's the kid?" Rosen asked.

Reggie uncurled himself and sat up. "I thank you. Might be worse. However. You will not have any evidence from the child."

"That's all right by me, brother," Rosen nodded. "I'm with you."

"You had better hear Launay's statement, Reginald," said Lomas. "He made it in severe pain, uncertain whether he would live—that may be taken as confirming it or the reverse, one never can tell—but it was clear enough, and it puts things in a new light, we'll have to work on it."

"My dear chap! You're always fair. Go ahead."

"Launay started with the woman. He met her first in Quebec before the war. She wrote signing herself Avice Denlan, asking him for money, telling much the same story she gave you, amplified. Her husband bush pilot, crashed in North Alberta, small firm that employed him shut down, she had baby left destitute. She'd come east to friends, but they couldn't keep her. She thought Launay might help her because he had backed air transport for western

development. He made enquiries, and verified James Denlan's crash, and the failure of the Alberta firm, and the fact that Denlan left a widow and boy baby. He sent for her, thought well of her, and made her an allowance. After a while she wrote him again, she had found, from her husband's papers, he had an uncle, Thomas Meon, in England, did Launay know anything of him, was he well-to-do? Launay took a poor view of that, left the letter unanswered, but as he did know Meon, wrote warning him about Avice Denlan. Meon sent no reply, and from then onwards Launay heard no more of her until, coming to England, he found her in Meon's house with child. That was the first time he'd seen the boy. It struck him at once the boy was like Meon, but not the least like her, and she didn't behave like a mother. He sounded Meon about her. Meon shut him up, quite plain she had something on Meon. Lady Meon had no use for her, and got rid of her, planting her in the Chelsea flat, but Meon still hung on to her, and had her at Hartdean whenever he went there. Both Meon and she laid themselves out to be intimate with him and his affairs. Meon introduced him to Toll, which gave him another jolt. He knew Toll's record from French contacts—Nazi-Fascist trouble merchant, gun-runner to Franco Spain, Balkans, Middle East. Toll got to work on him, telling him tales of German plans, fishing for information. Another nasty jolt at Hartdean when he saw the Denlan woman doing hole and corner work with Toll, and from the break of the raid Toll kept with him, but next morning vanished into the blue. He started enquiries among refugee French friends, and heard they suspected the fellow of selling their families in occupied France to the Hun, and stirring up trouble between Americans and English, having Meon on a string through the woman. That was why he went to her this afternoon. Rosen dazed him by calling her Blanche Fersen, and charges of murder of men he didn't know existed. Toll, breaking in and abusing him as a German, showed him Toll and the woman had planned the affair together. You went out, and he hurried after you for a straight talk alone. The woman got you before he could, and Rosen collared him, and he saw Toll behind pulling a pistol on him. He shot at Toll to save himself, and he might have done if Rosen hadn't knocked his hand up."

Lomas broke off, and lit a cigarette. "That's the substance of his statement. He was pretty well all in at the end, but he gave us a tail piece—it didn't matter to him, he had lived his life, but for the sake of the country we should deal faithfully with Toll and Meon and the woman."

"Sound advice," Reggie murmured. "Work on it. As you were sayin'."

Rosen's sombre eyes gleamed. "How much of it do you believe?"

"Not a lot. Part could be true. Always thought Meon queer over the woman."

"Launay linked Toll with them," said Rosen, "and left us guessing whether he meant Toll or Meon was the German number one."

"That is so," Reggie murmured. "Want further and better particulars."

"I rank Launay bottoms in every quality except smartness, but there he's tops," said Rosen. "He had to damn Toll. He wouldn't have dragged in Meon unless he was darned sure we'd get something on Meon when we went after him."

"Point well taken, yes," Reggie looked at Lomas. "What about it?"

"I agree," said Lomas. "But there are some awkward questions. Launay's gone on the record Toll pulled a pistol first, and he shot to save himself, and that fits the fact Launay was shot and Toll wasn't."

"Sure," Rosen grinned, "and that leads to the conclusion I fixed it Toll should do Launay in."

"Oh, no, no," Reggie protested. "Launay aimed at Tony."

"My dear Rosen, I am confident you and Fortune were right," Lomas assured him. "I only point out the difficulties. Toll came with a pistol, intending or expecting to shoot someone . . ."

"So did Launay."

"Yes, and their own statements gave reasons for each of them to shoot the other or the woman, but no reason why Launay should shoot the child."

"You said something," Rosen frowned.

"I wonder," Reggie murmured. "Haven't found all the pieces of the puzzle yet. Some held by the woman, some by Meon, some by Toll. Are the three waitin' below?"

"The woman and Toll, of course," said Lomas. "Not Meon."

"Why not?"

Lomas shrugged. "A man in Meon's position has no chance of breaking away. We can get him when we chose."

"You think so? Meon a softer job when you've put it across the other two? Yes, could be. Odd he hasn't come along and asked what you're doing with Tony and the woman."

"I take it he hasn't heard about them."

"Oh! Woman not allowed to send for Uncle Tom?"

"She can send for anyone." Lomas rang for Hublet, who said Mrs. Denlan had sent a message to Sir Thomas Meon she was at Scotland Yard and wanted him.

"Well, well," Reggie smiled. "Pandin' reaction take the helpful Toll."

CHAPTER XL

ONE DOES WHAT ONE CAN

"GENTLEMEN!" Toll bowed to Reggie and Rosen. "I felicitate you. I thank you. It is Mr. Lomas, is it not?" he bowed again. "Sir, I have long desired this occasion." He sat down. "But tell me, will the surgeons keep Launay alive for the hangman?"

"We knew you did your best to kill him," said Lomas.

"Pardon. If I had shot to kill, Launay would have died instantly. I shot to save the child, and also to make Launay suffer as much as possible. It will not suffice. But one does what one can."

"You brought your gun to shoot up Launay. Is that right?" Rosen asked.

"I hoped the opportunity would arise," said Toll. "I did not guess you would provide it."

"Look here. From the talk you handed out you could have put Launay on the spot long ago. You saw we had him cold. What was the idea of shooting him then?"

"Ah, no, sir! It is true you might have saved the child if I had not shot Launay, but I run no risk with a child's life. Let that pass. I avow I grasped the happy chance of exacting some retribution from Launay."

"And stopping his mouth," said Rosen.

"La, la, la," Toll made an impatient gesture. "The animal is not dead. I see well he has talked already. He will talk much more before you hang him. It makes me some good to think of."

"Toll!" said Reggie plaintively. "Begin at the beginnin'". When did you come across Launay first?"

Toll swung round, something like respect softening his fierce, scarred face. "You are right, my friend. I have not been frank with you. Forgive me. One must play as the cards are dealt. From the beginning, then. I heard first of Launay in the Franco war. It was my business to find out who sent arms to the Fascists, and I had reports one Launay, a Canadian, financed shipments from

America, from God knows where. A Canadian! I hardly believed it. Why the devil should a Canadian buy guns for Fascists? But when Spain was finished, I went over to Canada. In my business there is nothing more important than the financiers of foreign wars. What do I find? I find Mr. Frederic Launay rich, he has excellent reputation, the Launays are an old French-Canadian family. Yes, but there are no more of them, he alone, and he is not Canadian born, he made himself a Canadian citizen in 1919, after the last war, you perceive. That gives me to think. I enquire quietly, one tells me he came with French papers. Perhaps the Launay family exists still in France. It is possible. Is it possible a rich Frenchman of 1919 should exile himself to Canada and supply arms for Fascists? I doubt of it. I ask my friends at home do they know any French Launays. They answer not one, but there are Launays in Germany, officials, manufacturers. A Launay family set up one of the big iron works of Lorraine when the Germans took it in the terrible year, 1870, sold out to a neutral cartel just before the French won Lorraine back in '18, and disappeared. Quite Boche, is it not, win or lose the war, that makes no difference, war always brings big profits. I, I am more interested than ever in the rich Mr. Frederic Launay and his so excellent reputation. He has not sold out of Europe, that is sure, he arms the Spanish Fascists, like Hitler, like Mussolini. I enquire further, and I learn he goes often to the States, to the Middle West . . ."

"What do you know about Duluth?" Rosen snapped.

"But nothing at all." Toll showed some concern. "Should I? Where is it?"

"The gun that shot Falkenstein was bought there," said Rosen.

"I regret . . ." Toll made a gesture of sympathy. "Without doubt, then, Duluth is in the Middle West. You will know your country has some German elements there. Well, Launay is familiar with them, I speak of '39. Remember the last war. In '14, '15, Germany sent out adroit people to work upon German Americans that America should not fight. Germany never changes, never. Look then, I find Launay at the old game, how do you say, selling the Hitler Reich to your Middle West. There is no war yet, but I am very sure he prepares for it, it will come soon. What can I do? Nothing. He is all there is of the most correct. I can only warn them at home. My God! The whole world was warned enough. Then the wild beast breaks out again, and they call me back to Sweden. Poland goes down. By the turn of the year it is common talk Norway will go next, Denmark of course, Sweden perhaps. The Boche takes Denmark in an hour, strikes at Norway.

We are left to be eaten last. But some of us are ungrateful—not I, I like myself—it is our best who go and fight for Norway, and one a friend of my heart, at least he believed that I loved him. I pray the good God he believes it still. He did not return, he had not even the luck to be killed, he was wounded, and taken alive. One hears of him at last, one negotiates for him, but when he has tried to escape, he has been sent to a prison in Poland, one knows what that is like, a hell of hells. The good Boches who took a big price for his freedom made merry, no prisoner ever came out of Poland. In those days the Boche saw himself already lord of the earth. France crushed, England fighting her last hopeless battle alone. What to do? I remembered Herr Launay. If he is not back in Germany one can perhaps put pressure on him. I enquired of Canadian friends. The devil of a time for an answer. When it arrived the battle of Britain is on long ago, and behold Herr Launay has come to England. Soon I also am here. I find he keeps the best company, financiers, industrialists, he is, how do you say, Sir Thomas Meon's opposite number for Canada. Very well, friends of mine have done business with the Meon firm in peace time. They give me good introductions. I cultivate Meon, through Meon I make the acquaintance of Launay, I study him, we become familiar. He is more than a little curious what the devil a Swede is doing here, he hints there are profits to be made. Then I say without doubt, and I ask after his relations in Germany. He denies he has any. I say, I mock myself of that. It will not do. I have use for a man who can obtain the release of a friend from a German prison, but since Herr Launay will be no use to me I shall interest the English police in him. He . . .”

“Wait,” Rosen broke in. “By what you say, you knew he was here for German espionage and sabotage, and you let him go ahead and raise hell because you wanted he should do a job for you on the side.”

Toll showed neither regret nor resentment. “It is true,” he said quietly. “At the time I had no expectation Launay would be bold enough to effect so much espionage. Fifth column tricks, yes, not the grand game. I was wrong. It is a pity, but what would you? My affair was to save my friend. Well, Launay had fear of me, and I made the bargain with him, he to arrange Ulric was set free from the cursed prison in Poland and sent back home to Sweden, I to hold my tongue about Herr Launay. Did I believe he would keep the bargain? Yes. Me, I trust no Boche, but I have found the clever ones careful for their own necks, and Launay is clever, and his neck was mine for the taking. All the same, I press

him continually, I watch him close, him and Meon, I make myself intimate with Meon. I find Launay is more intimate. Launay is asked for a week-end at Meon's country house. I—I ask myself. I ring Meon I must go to Raddonshire on business, can he put me up? In fact, I am in Raster asking Kronberg what he can tell me of the German American Falkenstein of whom Meon and Launay make so much. Naturally Meon welcomes me at Hartdean. What else could he do? And I have the chance I desire to study Launay in the Meon entourage. It was valuable. Meon suffers some distraction of mind, little Norton also. Launay visits Meon's study between dressing-bell and dinner-bell. Launay and Falkenstein show themselves happy together with the beautiful Miss Buckland. Madame despises all, but most the woman who calls herself Meon's niece, Denlan. There is a hate, said I. I saw the woman for the first time, no one could be more insignificant. Why hate? She was not worth the trouble. Unless an infidelity of Meon—but I had no time to think more of her. As you know, the Boche bombers were also invited to Radbury that night, and I took Herr Launay out on a reconnaissance. I made nothing of it, though he had great fear of me, and swore I should soon hear Ulric was safe home."

"Had fear!" Rosen exploded. "You own you squeezed him over the raid. You'd thrown away hundreds of lives on a gamble for one man's life, and you were all set to give the swine more."

"But no," Toll answered calmly. "In effect I knew nothing that would prove Launay arranged the raid. It was long before you found anything, gentleman, with all your resources. For sure, I squeezed him. My affair was the life of my friend. Those others, they were lost already. Well, I bring the Herr Launay back to the house, and I find Falkenstein has been out all the evening with Miss Buckland, and when, at last, we got up to bed Launay enters Falkenstein's room. In the morning Miss Buckland talks much with Falkenstein and Launay, the Denlan woman also a little; Madame plainly disapproves, and desires we men should depart. I confess I am deceived. I go again to Kronberg at Raster, and ask him of Falkenstein and what the Americans think of the raid, and I see the beautiful Miss Buckland enjoy herself among young American officers. Kronberg tells me the Americans and the British troops and the Canadian troops accuse each other over the raid, and the American intelligence and the Scotland Yard police are busy upon it." Toll turned to Reggie. "I learn Mr. Fortune has visited Hartdean. Then I observe him at Raster. I make myself known to him. I give him information of Miss Buckland and Falkenstein and the Hartdean party. Sir, you may complain I misled you."

"Oh, no. No," Reggie answered. "Always thought you were playin' a game of your own."

"One does as one can," said Toll. "In effect the information I gave you was all true. Believe me, I hoped it would help you discover who in the Meon circle worked for the Boche. The more you alarmed Launay, the more he must expedite my affair to assure I did not advise you of him. That is the calculation I made. I have still no doubt it is right. But the Herr Launay is irrational, to betray me and my friend, Ulric, he betrays himself. Well, he succeeds according to plan with the troops in Raddonshire, and then you are on the track of his scoundrels, and always I watch him close. I see him meet a man by night in Whitehall, a man who lisps with the low New York accent. He conducts the fellow to a house in Brixton and returns. In the morning I find the house has been let for offices to little neutral businesses. Neutrals, ah, yes, some Spanish, some Swedes. I inform myself of them, they have a bad odour. And then"—Toll's eyes blazed, he struck his fist on the table—"then a letter comes to me from Ulric's wife—he is dead, dead of torture in the Boche prison. I seek the Herr Launay—but I have told you already how I sought him—you know how I found him. Again I make you my compliments that you discovered the woman Denlan, Fersen you call her, was employed by him in the Boche service. Without doubt you have discovered also her liaison with Meon, and the part Meon played in all this Bochonnerie. Me, I can no more. I pray you only keep Launay alive, that he suffers long before the hangman makes an end. That is all there is now."

"You're swell at hate, Toll," said Rosen. "When you get going. You've been slow on it."

"We are the servants of chance, both you and I, sir," Toll answered. "Without doubt, you did your possible. I do mine."

After a look which vainly invited comment from Reggie, wistful and aloof, Lomas spoke: "Your statement amounts to this, Toll. You covered up Launay's crimes for your own purposes, and so you were accessory before the fact."

"Is that law?" Toll asked politely, but with no interest. "I do not know the word."

Rosen laughed. "I believe you."

"The information you have given will be tested," Lomas went on. "It may result in a grave charge against you."

"If you please," said Toll. "I am altogether at your service."

"For the present you may go home," Lomas told him. "Stay there."

CHAPTER XLI

REACTION OF MEON

"He's not so hot," said Rosen. "I'll say he was out of his class with Launay. The way he tells it the whole thing looks like an old style gang break, all against all. He shoots up Launay, Launay goes all out to down him and Meon and the woman. He damns Meon and the woman with Launay. Of the bunch, I allow Toll makes the best show. I'd say his Ulric stuff was honest, Launay tricked him, and it hit him where he lived. But what sort of a fool crook was he to buy it?"

A plaintive sound came from Reggie, he stirred, he gazed at Rosen. "Tragic sort," he murmured. "Friend in danger. One bad chance only. Toll took it. Would you? Would I? I wonder."

"I would not," said Rosen. "I'm not putting it past you, Fortune. Well, granted Toll did his best for his buddy, how much will you go on the rest of the tale, he wasn't in the gang?"

"Could be true,"

"Quite," said Lomas. "On the whole he impressed me. But there's an awkward similarity between his bravado and Launay's. Each professed he didn't care what happened to him provided the other was for it. Both included Meon and the woman."

"As Rosen said," Reggie murmured. "However. Strikin' dissimilarity. Toll gave fresh evidence, which agrees with evidence we had."

"You mean on Roget's murder?" Rosen asked sharply. "He sure knows a lot about Roget. The evidence he gave fits good and well with his being the murderer, and trying to put himself in the clear."

Reggie made no answer. Superintendent Hublet entered and told Lomas Sir Thomas Meon had had a talk with the lady and was asking to see him at once. "Very well," Lomas nodded.

"Meon reaction prompt and urgent." Reggie sank down on the small of his back.

"I envy you, Lomas," said Rosen, and Lomas chuckled.

Meon came in, flushed, puffing. Lomas pointed him to the low chair. "Sit down. What's your business this time?"

Meon glowered at him, and beyond him at Reggie, at Rosen, and said: "A private, personal matter."

"There's no privacy for matters which have become a pub li

danger. Mr. Waldo Rosen, of the United States service, is acting with me."

"It's a pleasure, Meon," Rosen grinned. "Lomas has everything."

Meon moistened his lips. "I am here to explain the matter to the department concerned. I was not aware of any American interest, but by all means."

"You came because the woman you passed as your niece, Mrs. Denlan, sent for you," said Lomas. "You've met her. What did you arrange you would tell us?"

"I made no arrangement. Mrs. Denlan gave me an account of a violent scene at her flat in which Launay was shot by Toll after they had both attacked her. I found it impossible to understand what actually occurred, but . . ."

Rosen broke in. "Say, didn't she mention I was there first and said quite a piece?"

Meon was disconcerted. "I—er—I—I believe she did speak of someone else, a stranger."

"Yet you were not aware of any American interest."

"You had better tell the truth this time, Meon," said Lomas.

"You've put yourself in an ugly position."

"I resent that, I repudiate that," Meon exclaimed. "Damn it, I'm not to be insulted! The woman was hysterical. No one could make sense of her talk. I gather you've detained her on some charge. I want to know what it is."

"Of course you do," Lomas smiled. "Who will be charged and what the charges will be depends on your explanation of your own conduct. Launay's explained it, Toll's explained it. Now you have the chance. Anything you say may be used as evidence. Why did you give out this woman is your niece?"

Meon was silent for some time, and then exclaimed: "Launay and Toll be damned! Everything I say you can use as you please. I was sure the woman was my niece by marriage, Jim Denlan's wife. I had been in correspondence with her, she had his papers, you've only to look at her child and you'll see he's the Meon stock, like Jim."

"You were sure," said Lomas slowly. "But now you know you were wrong. When did you find that out?"

"I don't know I was wrong," Meon retorted. "My difficulty is I feel certain of the child, but I have found reason to suspect her. She's been more familiar than I care for, she's a gold digger. The way she went on this evening was abominable."

"You mean she threatened you?"

"She began by pawing me, I must help her and so on. I have had enough of that, it always means money. I pulled her up short, and she tried the tear tap, and then hysterics, with this story of Launay and Toll accusing her. I could make no sense of it. I asked her why the police had brought her here, what the charge against her was? She laughed at me, damn her impudent face, said she should worry, I must take care of her. Then I left her, and told your people I required to see you at once."

"So you admit she did threaten you with exposure," said Lomas. "Before admitting that, you stated that you had reason to suspect her. It's apparent she can bring up something against you. All the three—Launay, Toll and the woman—make accusations of each other in which you are involved."

"No one can bring anything against me. I'm not involved in anything."

"Your memory is bad, Meon," Lomas smiled. "You had Launay and Toll at Hartdean on the night of the raid. That night Government papers in your charge were removed and copied, and the copy was posted from Hartdean to a German espionage centre under Falkenstein's name. We asked you about that before, and you were insolent, you obstructed enquiry, you told us you suspected no one. Now you tell us you did suspect her."

"Not of that, not of espionage, it never entered my head the woman could be a spy, a German spy."

"Meon," Reggie murmured, "how long have you known she isn't Tony's mother?"

Meon twisted round with a jerk, his lips moved, but no sound came for a minute. "I—I—I don't know," he stammered. "I don't know she isn't. I don't feel sure now."

Rosen laughed. "The hell you don't."

"Haven't bothered to find out," said Reggie. "Pity."

"Your own statement incriminates you," said Lomas. "Where is the child's mother? Why have you let this woman pass for her?"

"That's absurd, Lomas; that's all wrong," Meon protested vehemently. "I told you I don't know, I don't feel sure, I've only come to realise it by degrees. I can't be certain, there's nothing definite."

"There was espionage in your house at Hartdean the night of the raid. The raiders were guided by German agents. A series of murders in Raddonshire followed, producing disturbances among the troops. All that was German secret service work carried out through people you have covered."

"I have not. It's impossible the woman did anything violent.

Launay came to me with official recommendations, and he introduced Toll. Damn it, if I knew of German spies at Radbury I shouldn't have held my tongue. No one suffered from the raid as much as I did."

"Oh! You're alive," said Reggie. "Men, women and children were killed, lots of 'em. They did suffer."

"Don't I know it?" Meon muttered.

"I wonder," Reggie gazed at him with cold curiosity. "Hope so."

"By your own account, Meon, you've been obstinately stupid, negligent and secretive," said Lomas. "Do you wish to add anything?"

"No, nothing." Meon scowled. "There is nothing more."

"There will be." Lomas pressed a bell push. "Don't try to leave London. I shall want you again."

"I'm not afraid of you." Meon heaved himself out of the low chair.

"Wait," said Reggie. "Forgotten the one thing, Meon. Haven't asked after Tony."

Meon made a stumbling step forward and gasped: "What? What about him? Where is he?"

"Safe," said Reggie. "Thanks for askin'. Good night."

"I asked you where . . ." Meon exclaimed, but the entry of Hublet interrupted him.

"Have Sir Thomas Meon taken home, Superintendent," said Lomas, and Meon was led out.

CHAPTER XLII

THE WOMAN

"You knocked the old guy endways, Fortune," Rosen laughed.

"Interestin' reaction, yes." Reggie showed no amusement.

"He's scared to death the kid will give us the goods on him."

"Could be. But the child will not."

"The child's fond of him?"

"Oh, no. Child isn't fond of anyone. Never had a chance."

"A child that age, whatever he may tell us, his evidence is worthless," said Lomas. "Meon's funk was gratifying, but we haven't enough to break the old rascal. We'll try the woman now." He spoke over the telephone with Hublet.

"Say, Lomas, let me handle this baby." Rosen was eager.

"If you like," Lomas consented, reluctance obvious.

Hublet brought the woman in.

She stood still looking all round the room. She glided towards Reggie. "Oh, Mr. Fortune," she held out her hands, "how is Tony?"

"Safe now," said Reggie.

"Take this chair," Rosen barked, pushing one upon her from behind.

"Thank you." She sat down and arranged herself, and smiled up at him. "It's Mr. Rosen, isn't it?"

Rosen turned Lomas's reading lamp to make the light shine into her eyes and sat opposite her. The glare discovered some lines, some blotches in the pale, pretty face. She opened her handbag, bent over it, looked into the mirror and powdered herself. "I am a fright," she said, giving him again an arch smile.

"Sure," Rosen answered. "Fright's the word. You have cause. These guys did squeal plenty on you. You're not a good picker. You bought it when you picked this number one."

She showed no alarm, but some mild surprise and curiosity. "Which do you mean?" she asked. "Who is number one?"

"What's your story how Jim Denlan's crash was fixed?"

"You are clever. I never knew. I suppose Uncle Tom began with that."

"Cut out the uncle. You didn't meet Meon in Duluth."

She drew herself up, prim and indignant. "I certainly did not. I don't know the place."

"After Jim Denlan's death you got Mrs. Denlan to stay with you not so far off till she passed out. Around then a .22 Philp was bought in Duluth. That gun came over here and shot Falkenstein. Who used it on him, who doped him? The killer didn't make a kill. Falkenstein had more luck than Mrs. Denlan. What's the story going to be now?"

The pale prettiness contracted to sharp angles and lines. "Mrs. Denlan wasn't shot."

"Aha. Dope only for her?"

"Dope, nonsense. She caught a chill and had bronchitis and died."

"You said something, baby," Rosen laughed. "Mrs. Denlan died under your hands, and you are Blanche Fersen."

She did not flinch, her big eyes had narrowed and were cold and intent upon him. "My name is Fersen," she said. "What then?"

"Plenty. You told folks and the doctor it was Blanche Fersen who expired so you could impersonate Mrs. Denlan."

"The doctor gave a certificate she died of bronchitis."

"Oh, you did fine. But old man Launay and Meon have spilled the beans."

"They are swine," she said quietly, but dropped her carefully precise accent as she went on. "They can't put me on the spot. It's the other way round. I'll show you. Launay contacted me in Detroit when I was working for a private detective agency, and sent me out to Edmonton with instructions I should pick up Jim Denlan: Launay wanted all he had on his English uncle, Meon. I fell for Jim quite a bit. He was that simple. We went on holiday to Banff, and there he met Avice Denlan, one of these big, shy blondes, and went off the deep end with her. Launay was pressing me I should get Jim over to Uncle Meon. What a hope! Jim married Avice quick, and they didn't have an English uncle on their map. Launay said to wait around, keep friendly with 'em. I thought he'd gone crackers. Come spring, Jim crashed way out in the bush. By what you say, you reckon Launay fixed that. I wouldn't know. I don't understand the first thing about planes. Avice had her baby in the summer and went off with him to Winnipeg. Launay sent instructions keep touch, look after 'em. That suited me all right. I had a soft spot for Avice, she was that helpless."

"You did the sob stuff over poor Blanche Fersen this afternoon," said Rosen. "Quit fooling. It won't get you any place. You were soft to Avice Denlan the way a snake is."

"No, sir," she went on unperturbed. "I'm telling you how things happened. I found Avice in a rabbit hutch of a shack outside Winnipeg, fretted to skin and bone with her troubles. She wouldn't have lasted the summer through in that hole. I hired a holiday cottage at La Niche by the Lake of the Woods and brought her and the kid down there. Then she went sick. What would I do with the kid if she died on me? I phoned Launay. He said be the kid's mother and take him over to Uncle Meon. So I played it that way, telling the doctor I was Mrs. Denlan and Avice, my friend, Blanche Fersen. She didn't know, she couldn't speak, she passed out, but ask the doctor and he'll answer for me I did everything possible to save her."

"Acting on Launay's instructions you should do her in and steal her child. Tell us some more. You're a great little teller, but he has you beat."

"Launay can't frame me," she answered quietly. "No one can."

It's a good thing for the child I mothered him. Where would he have been without me? In some Canadian orphanage. Jim and Avice had no use for old Meon, and never contacted him. I wrote him in her name, and he lapped it up I must bring my boy and live with him. Too easy! Launay said to go and get the old man feeding out of my hand, and letting me in on his business secrets. That was the assignment I had from Launay, old stuff, putting one big business guy wise to the jobs of another. I'll say I took it gladly." She patted her hair. "It placed me so I cashed in on both the old crooks. Meon wanted consolation for his frozen wife and he made me a settlement, and set me up in a flat. Launay paid through the nose for information about Meon's doings he didn't get. I strung along with them quite a while. Then Meon tumbled to it I'd never let him have me, and presently Launay realised I wouldn't play his game. Were they mad or were they? You know. Crazy to do me down. But they can't, brother. I'm sitting pretty."

Rosen laughed. "Look under your seat. You're sitting on the bomb holes you made, and you're not big enough to hide 'em. Tell us all you left out, how you worked things in the raid at Radbury and after. What do you say against Launay on that? Who stole the plans from Meon's desk and typed 'em out and posted 'em to a German agent?"

"How frightful!" she answered quickly. "I hadn't any idea Launay was on the German lay. It's between him and the Meon crowd who pulled that one."

"Sure," said Rosen. "And it was you, of the Meon crowd, who met Canadian officers at Chilcote after the raid and handed out a story American troops lit the fire that guided the German bombers."

"How absurd!" she cried. "Naturally I often had a date with Canuck boys. I didn't hand them any story. Everyone down there was blaming the fire on the Yanks."

"Now we know where we are with you," said Rosen. "Thanks a lot."

She folded her hands in her lap and smiled at them.

"You admit you have extracted money by false pretences," said Lomas, "and conspired with a man held for other and graver charges. The account you give of your association with him is unsatisfactory. I must detain you, Miss Fersen."

Her smile broadened. "That's your worry," she said.

Hublet, answering Lomas's bell, ushered her out, and she blew a kiss. "Give that to Tony, Mr. Fortune," she said. "From mamma."

CHAPTER XLIII

ON THE WHOLE

"I ALLOW I'm losing my grip," Rosen apologised. "I reckoned I could break her wide open. The hell I did. When a woman goes tough there is nothing tougher on God's earth."

"My dear fellow," Lomas shrugged. "You handled her very well. It's all chance in our trade."

"Oh, sure. The time you see yourself an easy winner is the time you take a toss. What the hell! We had so much on this wench it looked we'd drag the whole set-up out of her. Now she's handed us that amount of oil and gall we don't know how much we have on anyone, nor where we are."

A murmur came from behind them. "Wouldn't say that."

"Why, Reginald," Lomas turned. "Are you still with us?"

"In body, yes."

"The soul gone with your girl friend?"

"No. Not a nice woman. However." Reggie uncurled himself and stood up bit by bit and surveyed them dreamily. "She has her uses. Same like the bugs that knock out other bugs. Who knows the inscrutable design? Take the bugs the gods provide you."

"What way can we use her?" Rosen demanded angrily.

"No way, now. But she has been useful. Her doings the night of the raid gave us first and decisive evidence someone in the Hartdean party was crooked. Subsequent action led us to dig up her past. Without which case would still be obscure."

"God!" Rosen exclaimed. "Do you pretend you have it clear?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. All that matters. Start from the start. Launay, modern edition of his namesake the Prussianised Frenchman 'of judicious ways of no small intelligence, prudence and of very great skill in administering business.' War-monger. Had iron works in Lorraine, sold 'em to neutrals when he saw the French would get Lorraine back. Became French Canadian so he could work up the next war behind our front and your front."

"You take Toll's story?"

"This part must be true. He knows we can try it out. For the rest, Toll not the only witness. Use the Fersen woman. Launay engaged her to pick up Jim Denlan, Meon's nephew. Why? Obvious answer Launay wanted a pull on Meon. I should say she

did fall for Jim, as she told us; and therefore, as she did not tell us, when Jim and Avice married she ran a hate against them both. Did she arrange Jim's crash? Did Launay? I wonder. It was jam to the Fersen. It opened out Launay's game again. Avice with child, husband dead. Did the Fersen give Launay the idea, after birth of child, eliminate Avice and the Fersen would plant herself on Meon, widow with orphan? Or did Launay think it up first? We'll never know. Either of 'em may tell us and lie. Doesn't matter—now. The Fersen gloated over Avice's troubles, took her where nobody knew her, and made sure she passed out. Probably not legal murder. The Fersen may have bought the little pistol. Doubt if she shot Avice, though. Too dangerous. Even a careless G.P. might notice. Plenty simple means of killing a worn-out woman that leave no trace. Well. The Fersen carried on. Old Meon would be easy game. Son killed in an air crash. No heir of his own stock but Jim Denlan. Jim wouldn't come to him, preferred bush pilot's job. And then the Fersen wrote as Jim's widow, Jim had crashed, leavin' her with boy baby, baby image of Jim. Meon brought 'em over. No possible doubt child was genuine. Typical Meon face, as the old man said. He took child and mamma into his house and did her proud. She'd have been there for life if she'd buried her past. But she couldn't. Launay blew in, he had her where he wanted, and a bag full of tricks for her to play. She didn't dare refuse. She tried captivatin' Meon. Which was not a success. Contrariwise. Made the old man suspicious. I should say he told us almost the whole truth of himself to-night. He's been sure some time she came after his money, he has been doubting whether she is the child's mother. The bit of the truth he left out was he shied at a break with her for fear he'd lose the child."

"Oh, that won't go, Fortune," Rosen broke in. "After the raid, after the letter to the German espionage centre faked and posted from his house, Meon knew darned well he was harbouring a spy, who must be this wench."

"Ought to have realised, yes. Shut his mind against realisin'. Because he wanted Tony. No excuse. Still and all, no definite evidence then the Fersen was a spy, as he said."

"You're tying yourself in knots," Rosen answered. "You worked out from the start down there at Hartdean the wench was in on the faked letter job."

"I did, yes. Never thought she was the only one. Certain now she wasn't. Launay had a hand in stealin' the plans from Meon's study. She typed a copy durin' the night. He and she faked the letter between 'em. Don't suppose she took much part in Launay's

arrangements for the raid. May have passed things to Roget. Probably picked up Canadian boys and tried makin' 'em mad with Americans at large before raid, before her Chilcote visit. Well. Back in London. Rather bothered by me. Fought me off bold. Don't believe she doped Falkenstein's whisky or shot him. She knew she'd attracted our attention. Falkenstein affair Launay's work. Possibly pistol was hers, and he managed to get hold of it some time. No matter. Certain she didn't kill Roget."

"Go on," said Rosen.

"Finished," said Reggie, and curled up in his chair.

"The hell you have! You set out to show you had it clear."

"So it is."

"You mean we can't do a thing. We're short on evidence."

"Probably find the Fersen is sittin' pretty. As she bragged. Sorry about that. Like to have hanged her. However. Considerin' the bad hand providence dealt us, done very well on the whole."

"I thank you, Reginald." Lomas was annoyed. "What are the charges against Launay? Espionage, attempted murder, and murder. The only witnesses are Toll and the Fersen woman. Launay has replied with accusations against them and Meon. What a jury would make of such a case God only knows. There is nothing hard."

"My Lomas!" Reggie gazed at him with wide, reproachful eyes. "Call Underwood."

Lomas snatched the telephone . . . and upon Underwood's entry exploded: "How long have you been back? What did you make of Launay's house?"

"I've been in some time, sir." Underwood showed resentment. "Going through papers I found. No particular results yet. But hasn't Mr. Fortune told you?"

"Damme, leave Mr. Fortune out. I want to hear your report."

"Very good, sir. Launay did keep cats."

Rosen burst out laughing. Lomas scowled.

"Grey Persian cats," Underwood went on. "I have here hairs from them which I found on Launay's cushions." He laid an envelope before Lomas.

"One moment," Reggie murmured, rose slowly, and came to Lomas and gave him a metal box. "Take things in order. Exhibit A. Single hair of smoke-grey Persian cat, found by me on curtain in Meon's study." He produced another box. "Exhibit B. Hairs of smoke-grey Persian cat, found by me on remains of Roget. Exhibit C—the envelope—hairs of smoke-grey Persian cats in Launay's house. Indistinguishably like. Makin' the case against

Launay complete. Soon as he's well enough, get on with it and hang him."

"By the cat's whisker," Rosen grinned. "Swell!"

Lomas meditated for some time, and then said slowly: "I agree the evidence he murdered Roget is hard enough to ensure a conviction. So far the case is complete. But I doubt if we can convict him of espionage, though we must raise it and hold the trial *in camera*. But there are other issues, Reginald."

"Some yes. The Fersen. Might intern her for the duration, what? Quite likely Launay used more people, whom we've missed. However. Cleared up most of the mess. Stopped the German dirty work among the troops, eliminated chief operatives, caught the leader—and saved Tony."

"What about Toll and Meon?"

"The tragic Toll? Agony of his friend our one bit of luck. Life is like that. Brought Toll into action for us. Meon? Not a man and a brother, but meanin' well throughout accordin' to his imperfect lights."

"I dare say," Lomas shrugged. "The point is, Launay will defend himself by accusing them."

"Oh, yes. And give Toll a little more pleasure—pleasure of flayin' him." Reggie smiled awry. "Meon won't like it much, though *in camera*. Still, Meon can take it. May do him good. I wonder. All is best, though we oft doubt what the unsearchable disposer of highest wisdom brings about. Perhaps you hadn't noticed, Lomas. Who goes home? I do."

CHAPTER XLIV

CONFIDENCES

TONY was asleep.

Mrs. Fortune left the bedroom door open and went downstairs to the drawing-room.

Margot rose from the edge of a chair, obscured Norton behind it, asked breathlessly: "Tony?"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Fortune. "As it happens Tony was not much hurt. How do you do, Major Norton? I hope Sir Thomas Meon is well."

"We've only just heard." Norton came forward. "Meon's at Scotland Yard. Is Tony here? I want to see him."

"Tony has gone to bed."

Norton looked uncomfortable. Margot broke in. "You think I'm a beast, Mrs. Fortune. So I am."

Mrs. Fortune did not dispute it, but she sat down and waited for more.

"Tony's had a rotten time," said Norton.

"That's not your fault," said Margot. "You looked after him whenever you were about, and he liked you. It simply bored me to hear you fussing over him. Do you remember the raid night, when Tony came in upon us at dinner scared by the scream he heard, and you picked him up and comforted him?"

"Oh, well." Norton flushed. "Anybody would have done that."

"I didn't, Florence didn't, Uncle Tom didn't. If you want to know, I thought you were silly sentimental."

"This isn't of any interest to Mrs. Fortune," said Norton.

"I am glad Miss Buckland came with you," she answered.

"Don—Major Norton," Margot explained, "made a fuss with me I ought to persuade Uncle Tom he should keep Tony and Avice with him. I didn't try. It seemed to me one more bit of conscientious slop." She turned on Norton, breathing deep, eyes blazing, colour high. "Yes, you're all conscience. And I haven't any. That's the trouble."

"We needn't argue," Norton told her. Their eyes met and fought. She was silent.

"Have you heard from Sir Thomas Meon of—Avice?" Mrs. Fortune asked.

"Yes, but the first thing was a Scotland Yard call," said Norton; "she's been taken there, and wanted to see him. He went, and after a long time rang Lady Meon. Avice had confessed she wasn't Tony's mother, and there'd been an attempt to kill Tony in her flat, and Mr. Fortune had gone off with him—but I suppose you know the whole story."

"Not quite," said Mrs. Fortune. "Did Lady Meon ask you to come here?"

Norton hesitated. "Well, no, she didn't exactly. She was thinking of Meon, of course."

"She wasn't concerned about Tony?"

"She's always been decent to him," Margot defended her. "She never could stand Avice. Nor could I, if you come to that."

"But she let Avice take Tony away from her."

"I believe it was Uncle Tom arranged Avice should go and live in a flat with Tony."

"Lady Meon let the woman keep Tony after she had been warned he needed care," said Mrs. Fortune.

"I didn't know." Margot looked at Norton.

"She wouldn't tell you." He shook his head. "I think she told Meon, though. That is why Lady Meon said he must be grateful to Mr. Fortune now."

"She was generous," Mrs. Fortune replied. "Did she say anything of Tony?"

"When we told her we were going to see him she said she supposed we should."

"She supposed you would, Don," Margot corrected him. "She was surprised at me. I don't wonder."

"She made no difference between us," Norton retorted sharply.

"She understood very well we're both keen on Tony."

Margot laughed. "I am an exhibitionist. Poor you. I . . ."

The parlourmaid interrupted, and gave Mrs. Fortune a card, received: "Yes," for an answer, withdrew, and brought in Lady Meon.

Ruffled, deflated, nervous, hurrying behind her, Meon stumbled and stopped as he saw Margot with Norton, and stood glowering at them.

Lady Meon glided on. "We have put you to so much trouble, Mrs. Fortune, and I have no excuse. I hoped I might thank Mr. Fortune, but we were told he is not at home."

"He doesn't require any thanks, Lady Meon."

"Where's Tony?" Meon came forward. "What's he done with him?"

"Tony is asleep upstairs."

"Please let us hear what Mr. Fortune thinks of his condition," said Lady Meon.

"He was not injured in the attack upon him at the woman's flat, but the effects of the shock may be serious. He needs careful treatment. He hasn't had a good home. He has never been happy."

"That damned woman!" Meon muttered, looking down, looked up with a jerk and went on: "I beg your pardon. She played me for a fool, and I was. The boy's everything to me. There's nothing but him in the end of the day."

"No, nothing," said Lady Meon quietly. "I have not made myself anything to him." She turned. "Perhaps one may try again, Mrs. Fortune."

Margot broke in. "Tony will be all right. We'll look after him."

Lady Meon glanced from her to Norton. The little man blushed.

"That's the sort of thing," said Meon. "Well, I'm much obliged, Mrs. Fortune. We mustn't keep you any longer. I'll ring Fortune to-morrow."

They were gone. Mrs. Fortune sat gazing into the fire. . . .

Lady Meon in the car with her husband—Margot and Norton chose to walk home—received from him only one comment, Norton wasn't a bad little chap, and it would do very well. She made no answer. He didn't want any. He wanted her in his way, he wanted her with him, he had poured himself out to her over the wretched Avicé. She wasn't wholly superfluous. But Tony was everything, he cared for nothing but Tony. He did not intend that to hurt. In fact she did not feel hurt, only a vague regret. He really believed there was nothing but Tony "in the end of the day." The Meon blood must live on, someone must bear the Meon name when he was gone. He had no sort of affection for the child, only need. If she had given him a son—that wouldn't happen—did she want a son very much?—how could one know? And now there was Tony. Who would have thought of Margot promising to look after the boy? Margot opening her arms to Don Norton at last over a child! One could understand Don, worthy little man, and feel pleased he had won upon her at last, but Margot! Perhaps it would do very well, as Tom said. One might help. A new experience . . .

Mrs. Fortune turned and watched the door. Reggie came in, sat beside her, held her hand, murmured: "Joan." Some minutes later he said: "Too bad, leavin' you with the Meon party."

"They weren't difficult." She gave him an account of the conversation. . . . "You see, I have been 'mistook in my judgments.'"

"Nohow. Contrariwise."

"I told you Margot was not kind. She is."

"Yes. Also said she had not found herself. Which now she has. Right about Lady Meon, cold, selfish, despises people. And about Meon, swollen head, selfish plus."

"I was too hard upon Lady Meon."

"Hard? You? My dear girl!"

"I was hard with her to-night, and now I am sorry for her. The man showed off he thinks her worthless. That's horrible. Still, he isn't altogether selfish."

"Self-made man, worships all he made."

"He does care for the child in his fashion."

"As a part of himself. Yet he backs his own people through thick and thin. Margot and Norton through the Falkenstein business. Might be worse. They know him inside out, and they link up to stand by him."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Let's have a look at Tony."

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